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ABSTRACT

A phenomenological hermeneutic approach was used to explore the process of being and becoming a distance learner and ways the distance learning environment is inhabited or known. The study's author analyzed her own distance learning experiences and those of three other individuals (two females and one male) with an interest in education and distance learning experience at the undergraduate and/or graduate levels. After reviewing the literature on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and distance and lifelong learning, the study's author recorded her own experiences and the personal narratives of her three "co-researchers" in detail. Finally, she reflected on all four personal narratives from the standpoint of the symbiotic relationship between distance learning, lifelong learning, and personal development. The following were among her 10 recommendations regarding distance learning: (1) distance learners must take ownership of their learning situation by being responsible for their learning as more independent and self-directed learners; (2) although self-pacing is important, keeping the cohort experience is advantageous; (3) the issue of isolation/connection must be addressed; and (4) although technological tools are an asset, the human element must not get lost. (The document contains 119 references. Appended are a co-researcher biography form and detailed account of one co-researcher's consultation.) (MN)

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ED 434 231

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BEING A DISTANCE LEARNER

BY

SIMONNE D. M. DICKIE

A thesis submitted to the

Athabasca University Governing Council in partial fulfillment

Of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

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The undersigned certify that they have read and recommend to the Athabasca University Governing Council for acceptance a thesis, THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BEING A DISTANCE LEARNER submitted by SIMONNE D. M. DICKIE, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION.

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Date: _____, 1999

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to anyone who believes in the value of trying to understand other people's lifeworlds.

Abstract

The intent of this study is to explore purposefully the "being and becoming" a distance learner. The aim is to inquire into the meaning and significance of distance learning by asking "what?" is distance learning as experienced by four learners (myself, Louise, Axel, and Meg). We examine the moments of a distance learner and pass through the moments themselves as lived experiences. The purpose of explicating the distance learning experience is to discover meanings and communications that could affect the learners' well-being. By exploring the phenomenon of being a distance learner, we can gain insights into how the distance learning environment is inhabited or known.

The thesis begins with an introduction that raises the questions: How is distance learning experienced? What is the meaning of distance learning for learners? When we are learning at a distance, what is it we are attempting to do, to accomplish, to gain, to discover? I use personal narratives to begin the phenomenological hermeneutic process of trying to understand the meaning of being a distance learner. There is the underlying assumption that we can learn from other people's lived experiences, and can even relate to the similarities or differences between our lifeworlds. The second chapter gives a broad overview of the distance learning world, which, because of their connections to distance learning, leads to a discussion of the lifelong learning system and personal development. In addition, there is a detailed account that explains why qualitative research, and in particular, the phenomenological hermeneutic approach, is an appropriate method to use for this particular inquiry. Chapter three describes the methodology, phenomenological hermeneutic research. It serves to explain important phenomenological concepts, which have direct relevance to

research methodology, and lays out the approach that is used to investigate the "lived experience of being a distance learner." Chapter four is Louise's chapter. Her narratives are the first ones to lead the way into our study of the lived experiences of distance learners. Chapter five is Axel's chapter. We attempt to further our understanding of the lifeworlds of distance learners through Axel's experiences. Chapter six contains an account of Meg's lifeworld as it relates to distance learning. Our interpretations are shared and summarized in chapter seven. I end with chapter eight, which shares reflections and offers recommendations developed from the study.

This study reveals in depth how distance learners experience distance learning. Their narratives are filled with the relevant details about the moments of their everyday distance learning lifeworld and the significance of these moments as they relate to the meaning of their distance learning experiences. By sharing what they discover and what they gain or lose through their participation in the distance learning world, we are able to explicate and to further our understanding of the unintended and essential outcomes of their distance learning experiences. We come to know some of the advantages and disadvantages of the distance learning format, such as quality control, accessibility, and an environment that fosters self-responsibility and independent learning, which in turn promotes the development of increased self-confidence and levels of competence. We learn that learners who are given more control over their learning situation become more self-directed and take ownership of their learning. Although the distance learning format requires learners to deal with content, they face the extra challenge of using advanced learning tools. This study shows that the risk factor and the stimulation that this extra challenge entails should not be viewed as a

disadvantage, but rather as an opportunity to enhance personal and professional development. This study also elucidates for us the qualities of limitless lived time and the boundaryless lived space of the distance learning world and how these qualities add to the sense of freedom, hope, opportunity, and empowerment that exist within the distance learning experience. There exists a feeling of expanding and broadening one's world, and of incorporating lifelong learning as an ongoing reality in one's life. This study enlightens our understanding of the balance between isolation and connections or relatedness that distance learners struggle with. The narratives speak loudly of the essential issues that relate to the distance learner's sense of well-being, opportunity for actualization, and ultimately tell us that being a distance learner means living and experiencing a personal transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A sincere thank you is due to many people for their assistance and support. We are all indebted to the co-researchers for giving us privileged access into their lives. This study is possible because of their participation. They generously shared their narratives and they were an integral part of the interpretive process. I am grateful to Louise, Axel and Meg for their generosity and for the integrity they displayed during the research. I am thankful for the opportunity that Athabasca University has given me to pursue this challenge. In particular, I thank Dr. Bob Spencer and Dr. Eila Lamb for accepting to work as part of my thesis committee. In addition I feel sincere thankfulness that Dr. Spencer has been my advisor throughout my journey through the Master of Distance Education program. I wish to express my deep gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Patrick J. Fahy, for his very valued expertise and unwavering guidance. Dr. Fahy first planted the seed to consider using a phenomenological hermeneutic approach and he has truly been my mentor during this whole process. The work involved with this study has been memorable and without listing names of friends and family because you know who you are, know the significance and unique roles you had in the lived experience of being involved with this thesis.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE 'WHAT' AND 'WHY' OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND HERMENEUTICS

How is distance learning experienced? What is the meaning of distance learning for learners? When we are learning at a distance, what is it we are attempting to do, to accomplish, to gain, to discover? If learning is an important goal of distance learning, then what do we learn? There is the intentional learning, but there are also unintended outcomes. What do distance learners experience in addition to what has been purposely planned as part of the curriculum?

Background

The nature of this thesis leads me to share with you at the onset why I chose to use a phenomenological hermeneutic approach for my research methodology. Let us first give a brief overview of what seems to exist in the distance learning literature at present. This brief summary will show the gap I feel is present in the study of distance learning, and lead to why I decided that a more wholistic research approach is needed to explicate the distance learning experience and to discover its essential qualities. It is not my intent to elaborate on this literature, but to use it only to expose the gap that a phenomenological hermeneutic study can address. I then discuss why phenomenological hermeneutics is an appropriate tool for this study and give a brief explanation of what phenomenological hermeneutic work entails. This introduction leads into the participatory nature of your involvement as reader of the

narratives. You will immediately get a taste of some narrative material because I will share with you a little of my own distance learning lifeworld. I end this chapter with an overview of the intent of my thesis.

First let us expose the gap that exists in the present literature. The literature covers many aspects of the distance learning system. It abounds with research that deals with many parts of the system, such as financial issues, curriculum, demographics, cognitive aspects of the learning process, performance factors, instructional design, and learning styles. For example:

1. We know some things about costs and can study the effects of costs on student attendance (Cuskelly and Dekkers, 1991).

2. The Gordon survey (1996) profiles the preferred productivity and learning style preferences of distance education participants.

3. We can read about issues dealing with curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment regimes (Joughin and Gordon, 1992).

4. We can access a statistical report that presents the demographics of lifelong learning trends (Kohl, 1992).

5. Miller (1997) uses demographic data and a questionnaire to study cognitive style of distance learners.

6. Moore's (1996) research is performance oriented and looks at quality within the distance learning system.

7. There is research that questions the worth of high investment in the design of written materials for use in distance education and which conclude that high investment in the design of written materials seems worth the effort, but that student characteristics should be taken into account in writing the materials (Poelmans, 1992).

8. Riddle (1992) gathered quantitative data to determine if the learning style of field dependence/independence has any effect on the cognitive outcomes and attitudes of students in a distance education class.

9. One study did analyze four dimensions (cognitive psychological, educational psychological, psychometrical, and content based) in order to help construct knowledge profiles (Wagemans, 1992).

10. Oliver and McLoughlin (1996) focus on performance issues. They identify the form, nature, and purpose of interactions employed by instructors and students using a Live Interactive Television (LIT) system. They study the level of student response, and the impact and role of these interactions on lesson development and delivery, through a detailed analysis of transcripts from videotapes of five local LIT teaching programs, including school, vocational, and university-delivered LIT. Transcript analysis reveals that interactions tended to fall into the following types: social, procedural, expository, explanatory, and cognitive.

11. The Neihaus (1995) project aims, first, to identify cognitive and metacognitive skills needed for masters level study; second, to develop an instrument to determine students' readiness for masters level work; and third, to design bridge courses to prepare a prospective student.

On a more limited basis than the above examples, the literature also deals with elements within the learning system that arouse feelings and emotions associated with distance learning experiences. This research, however, continues the above pattern of focussing on parts of the distance learning experience. The present research that deals with the affective elements within the distance learning experience is usually examined as part of access and motivational issues (Woodley, 1993, pp. 110-124; Calvert, 1986, pp. 90-92). Two other

examples are (a) Kahl and Cropley's work (1986, pp. 38-49) which addresses the psychological consequences related to distance learning and suggests that educators prioritize methods rather than product, and (b) Gibson's study (1996) which examines the nature of academic self-concept in distance education, with an attempt to determine its enhancers and detractors. Gibson concludes that self-concept is an important variable within the distance learning experience and adds that educational systems can modify their educational practices to enhance learner success.

What is missing in the present body of research is research that examines the whole life experience of the distance learner. I have yet to find an account that studies the distance learner from a wholistic contextual perspective with the intent to understand the whole-lived experience of distance learners. By explicating the whole lived experience of being a distance learner, we may discover essential elements that have been neglected. It is important to get to the roots, to the essence of being a distance learner, and explicate the distance learner's lifeworld within a distance learning system in order to further our understanding of a distance learner's experience. (By distance learning system, I mean that from a phenomenological sense, descriptions are related from a wholistic perspective. A system includes all its parts; no variables are excluded from the totality of the experience.) Thus, I chose a phenomenological hermeneutic approach as a method of getting to the essence of being a distance learner, of explicating the distance learning lifeworld. The essence of a complex entity, such as distance learning, can be described through the study of its interrelation of parts, not parts as separate units, but as parts of a total system. It is these parts that exercise a determining influence on the phenomenon. Phenomenology is a systematic method of uncovering and describing the internal meaning of lived experiences by

using descriptions of the total system, all the parts. Existing studies tend to fragment the system by focussing on certain chosen parts of the system, and by asking how or why distance learners learn. Phenomenology asks "what" the nature of the experience is so that we can better understand what the distance learning experience is like for distance learners. "Phenomenological knowledge is empirical, based on experience, but it is no *inductively* empirically derived. It means that phenomenology goes beyond an interest in 'mere' particularity" (van Manen, 1990, p. 22). Phenomenology is description that "reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner" (p. 10). Phenomenology is so inclusive that when it focusses on meanings, it does not particularize its research, or try to avoid certain variables; rather, it encompasses our lifeworld, with all its significant and everyday moments.

By researching the lived experiences within the distance learning system, we deepen our understanding of the distance learner's lifeworld. The process of deepening our understanding begins with the phenomenological or descriptive element. This process is intensified by the hermeneutic or interpretive element. In his text, van Manen (1990) uses the term description to include both the hermeneutic and phenomenological components. He may emphasize the descriptive function by referring to phenomenology, and he may emphasize the interpretive function by using the word hermeneutic, but van Manen does use the words interchangeably. In this thesis, the words are used interchangeably as well, particularly since reference is made to other authors. My approach in this study, however, is to separate the two functions, and I use a method that begins with the descriptive function, and then follows with the interpretive function. Although the co-researchers are asked to describe without reflection, and then to return to the descriptions from a reflective and

interpretive point of view, you, as the reader, have a more immediate experience with the hermeneutic quality. From the reader's perspective, the "phenomenological nod" (van Manen, 1990, p. 27) is a response that happens as we read the description. We respond to the narrative in order to conceive its significance or explain its meaning. We do not reduce the narrative into its parts without primarily focussing on the total picture. This "phenomenological nod" is not an analysis of the situation (reducing the narrative into its parts for the purpose of individual study), but recognition from us that the description is an experience that we have had or could have had. The description evokes an experience, which we then validate through another person's (perhaps our own) lived experience. The co-researchers provide concrete portrayals of distance learners' lives, and as readers of these narratives we may relate these descriptions to the particulars of our own lives.

Another reason for me to choose a phenomenological hermeneutic approach is because this methodology it is in tune with my personal preference to involve the principle of collaboration. I do not refer to the co-researchers as subjects. They are valued for their descriptive and their interpretive input; they are respectfully encouraged to share in the interpretive process by means of a consultative review of their narratives.

In order to validate, not only do the co-researchers return to their descriptions and reflect upon the meaning of their experience, but they also critically review my interpretations. In addition, the readers decide for themselves what level of credibility exists within the hermeneutic elements of the study, and make their own interpretations about the meaning of the experience. As you read the narratives within this text, you are given *privileged access* to another person's life, and are allowed to make your own interpretations; you also read interpretations, which is a catalyst for you to make more interpretations. As soon as you

begin reading a narrative, you are immediately invited to join the participatory nature of this methodology.

Personal Narratives

I offer you my narratives as an opportunity to begin the process of raising the question concerning the meaning of being a distance learner and to illustrate the form of this thesis. I have two anecdotal accounts for you to "listen" to. Here is the first:

From the time I finished my undergraduate degree, I had planned to enter a master's program. At the time (1970's), a person who finished their undergraduate studies in the social sciences could work for an agency for two years, and then that same agency (mine was the Children's Aid Society - CAS) sponsored one into the postgraduate program. After completion of the MSW degree, I would have been committed to working for CAS for two years. Mark Twain said that what is really consistent in life is change (Twain, 1923), and true to Twain's belief, midway into my first two year stint at CAS, the process changed and I was left in the middle of a plan that did not exist any longer.

I continued to work at CAS and later a move to Calgary presented me with an opportunity to revisit the option of seeking a master's degree. Academic and professional choices led me to working for Services for the Handicapped instead.

It wasn't until 1996 (I'm in my 40's now) that I discovered a total distance learning program that offered a very interesting and accredited master's program. Because distance learning makes education accessible, the master's program is now a reality for me. Needless to say, I'm committed to the value that distance learning can offer the educational system.

"What" does distance learning mean? To me, it means hope; it means opportunity. Distance learning adds value to the educational system by giving a feeling and a sense of expectation that a desire can be fulfilled. "Access to education means access to a better future. It's the difference between one person's hope and another's hopelessness" (The Commonwealth of Learning, 1998).

You can perhaps imagine my joy when I was accepted into the Master of Distance Education (MDE) program, but can you envision what the challenge, the stimulation, and the accomplishments mean to my well-being. Further, consider the positive effects that personal growth can have for the people and the environment that surround me.

The essence of distance learning for me is that it gives life and being to something valuable that didn't previously exist. At the root is the renewed wishful trust that something that one longs to see realized now has the potential for actualization.

My first narrative recounts my experience at the beginning of the postgraduate process. The next narrative occurs later during the learning process:

During my postgraduate studies, I have become even more confident that my chosen subject matter is extremely relevant and worthwhile, and that my university is providing a challenging program with standards indicating solid signs of integrity within the system. Nonetheless, I am faced with one consistent question by people who speak to me about distance learning: "How can you expect that your distance learning can be as satisfactory as classroom learning without face-to-face discussion?" I had taken classroom postgraduate courses and knew from personal experience that class discussion and collaborative work via computer mediated communications (CMC) had produced effective learning experiences. An event that confirmed my feelings happened in May 1998. My postgraduate university offered

a face-to-face optional workshop. Yes, we were keen to "see" each other and extra bonding occurred, but when we shook hands for the first time, we did not say "Pleased to meet you." We took off from where we had left off online:

"You haven't mentioned 'G...' lately, D.... Is your dog okay?"

"To continue about your enterprise in 604, S..., are you sure that...?"

"Is 7:00 still okay to further discuss the program completion route I'm planning?"

It was amazing; my distance learning peers and instructors were not distant. We never had been. We already knew each other and simply continued our relationship as an ongoing experience. This experience emphasized the reality of the statement I read later at the Global Learn Day website: "There are no borders...Distance is only in the mind" (Available at http://www.oltraining.com/GLD2/gldslds/sld016.htm.).

The calibre of the face-to-face learning at the workshop was as I had already come to know it via distance. The quality of the workshop and conference was equal to what I had already come to expect via distance. In addition, I confirmed for myself that I truly had developed a sense of loyalty for my university; and I had established a sense of belonging and identity with my co-learners. My distance learning world encompasses a warm and people-oriented experience, and distance learning need not be dominated by the feeling that technological equipment rules the process. It can be legitimately said that distance learning uses tools that create and enhance human interaction. Consequently, both face-to-face and distance learning use learner-learner interaction, learner-tutor interaction, learner-content interaction, and learner-interface interaction (Hillman, Willis and Gunawardena, 1994). What is unique about distance learning is that the interaction takes place without the physical presence of the people with whom we are relating. I had developed a sense of belonging, a

sense of identity, a sense of camaraderie, before I had physically seen any of my peers or instructors.

I was curious. Did anyone else feel the same as I did? The first discussions indicated that some did and some did not. We dialogued about this question of distance interaction. People shared more deeply their situations. It seemed that people who did not experience the same interaction as I had felt with the distance learning format were also people who said they preferred not to seek similar interaction in the classroom situation. In other words, they had made the same choices in their distance learning lifeworld as they had or would have made in a classroom situation. Some students chose not to participate, any more than necessary, in the computer-mediated communications (CMC). At a CADE seminar which discussed this very issue (learner interaction and peer group identity and support), Al [pseudonym] said that he had made a conscious decision to neglect the CMC components of his courses. After the seminar discussion, he shared his realization that he was not aware that his decision had cut him off from peer association, and that the seminar discussion had altered his feelings about CMC participation. He added that he now saw that CMC participation offers an opportunity to meet people, not just an opportunity to gain or lose some marks.

I became even more curious to discover what being a distance learner means to individual distance learners within the context of their unique experiences. It is time to try putting presuppositions aside, and to investigate the lived experience of distance learners. It is time to listen to the lifeworld of distance learners, to take seriously their narrative texts in order to bring to a level of conscious concern the qualities of distance learning. The lived experiences told in this study may not reflect the experiences of other distance learners. My

lifeworld does not need to be representative in order to reinforce the need to examine distance learning at its deepest and most personal level. We are unique as learners, but within our diversity we can relate to other people's experiences. We can learn from other people's experiences. Can we even make the distance learning system better through our listening and learning?

Intent

"Within the tradition of the human sciences, education has long insisted upon a primary and irreducible interest in Life … in life in general in all its myriad immensity and fullness. … [T]he philosophy of life that would be appropriate as a starting point for education would be a philosophy that would resist the segmentation and fracturing of life … There is a fullness, a wholeness, a completeness to life that … education aims to serve, attempts to elucidate" (Evans, 1989, p. 20). Elucidate means to make clearer our understanding, to explain (Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary, p. 307). Lucid is from the Latin *lucidus* (bright, Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary, p. 590; shine, Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, p. 539), so to make lucid is the process of enlightenment. Just as education attempts to be a process of elucidation for learners, this study uses descriptive narratives to enlighten our understanding of the distance learning process. For the purpose of this study, which intends to offer more in-depth information and a deeper understanding about distance learners through narratives, we aim for descriptions that lead to the interpretation of what it means to be a distance learner. The descriptions are enlightening, and therefore lead to interpretation (to expound or explain the meaning), to an understanding of what it means to be a distance learner.

With the human science approach, practice (or life) comes before theory; theory comes as a result of reflection. Human science (a) aims for "interpretive descriptions that exact fullness and completeness of detail" (van Manen, 1990, p. 17), (b) acknowledges that it is the complexity and mystery of life that calls for thought, reflection and knowledge, and (c) intends to deepen our understanding of human life. The notion of understanding (*Verstehen*) believes in the "power of thinking, insight and dialogue" (p. 16). By maintaining a thoughtful and conversational relation with the world, we can make our lifeworld more understandable to each other, and make our lived experiences intelligible.

To be rigorous in our research requires that we recognize the uniqueness and significance of lived experiences. We remain sensitive to the range of meanings of life's phenomena and bring these meanings to our reflective awareness. Although full and final descriptions are unattainable, hermeneutic phenomenology is committed to try and further our understanding of our "human world *as we find it* in all its variegated aspects... Phenomenological [hermeneutic] research finds its point of departure in the *situation*... [T]he human scientist stays right there in the world we share with our fellow-human beings ... [and helps] us to understand better what is most common, most taken-for-granted, and what concerns us most ordinarily and directly" (van Manen, 1990, p. 19).

Within the context of phenomenological hermeneutic research, the term objectivity means that the researcher remains true to the phenomenon by describing and interpreting it "while remaining faithful to it—aware that one is easily misled, side-tracked, or enchanted by extraneous elements" (van Manen, 1990, p. 20). The term subjectivity "means that we are *strong* on our orientation to the object of study *in a unique and personal way*—while avoiding the danger of becoming arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried

away by our unreflected preconceptions" (p. 20). Phenomenological hermeneutic research aims to gain a reflective understanding of a phenomenon and "invites a dialogic response from us" (p. 21).

In this introductory chapter, I have used my narratives as a prompt for raising the question of the meaning of being a distance learner. No assumption is made that my experience is either typical or atypical in the way that I describe and discuss my student life. We are all unique, and this study recognizes and deeply respects this diversity. There is the underlying assumption that we can understand other people's lived experiences, and can even relate to the similarities between our lifeworlds, and learn from them.

In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate the value of describing the lived experiences of distance learners in order to better understand the fullness, the wholeness, and the complete experience that exist within the lifeworld of distance learning. I have attempted to show how at the root of effective learning lies the essence of the system itself. By listening to the learners' lived experiences, educators can better understand the foundational qualities required to enhance the well-being of learners, and to genuinely serve the people for whom the system exists. If we examine the lifeworlds of distance learners, we have the potential to discover unlimited knowledge about the learner's experience of being in the distance learning system.

A phenomenological hermeneutic study is not a closed discovery method. A distance learner's description can illuminate some important aspects of the learning experience. If we do not open our research to include all elements of distance learning by allowing distance learners to describe their lifeworlds, then it is the researchers only, and not the learners, who choose the topics to study, the areas to emphasize, and the elements to ignore. On the other

hand, if we do allow a more wholistic and inclusive approach, then we come to a fuller understanding of the distance learners' lived experiences. As a result, educators can better serve distance learners by being more aware of the essence of being a distance learner, of the essential qualities that are part of the distance learning experience.

Having raised the question for this thesis, the next two important issues that must be addressed are:

1. The background literature and concepts related directly to the topic, and my comments about the these materials are reviewed.

2. The research approach that I have decided to use in order to be able to address the meaning of lived experiences, the questions of life, and in particular, the meaning of being a distance learner is examined.

Chapters two and three are devoted to these issues, the review of relevant literature and concepts, and the methodology. The second chapter gives a broad overview of the distance learning world, which leads to a discussion of the lifelong learning system. In turn, lifelong learning leads to another related topic, personal development. In addition, there is a detailed account that explains why qualitative research and, in particular, the phenomenological hermeneutic approach is an appropriate method to use for this particular inquiry.

Chapter three describes the methodology, phenomenological hermeneutic research. It serves to explain important phenomenological concepts which have direct relevance to research methodology, and lays out the plan that is used to investigate the "lived experience of being a distance learner."

Then we proceed to the narratives and the interpretations. Chapter four is Louise's chapter. Her narratives are the first ones to lead the way into our study of the lived

experiences of distance learners. Chapter five is Axel's chapter. We attempt to further our understanding of the lifeworlds of distance learners through Axel's experiences. Chapter six contains an account of Meg's lifeworld as it relates to distance learning.

Our interpretations are shared and summarized in chapter seven, and I end with chapter eight, which gives reflections and recommendations developed from the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before we embark on the narratives themselves, we should have a close look at the development of distance learning, and get a broad overview of the world we are entering. Since we are going to increase our understanding of lived experiences within the distance learning world through phenomenological hermeneutic research, we should also have a detailed account that explains why qualitative research and, in particular, the phenomenological hermeneutic approach is an appropriate method to use for this particular inquiry. Further, this study introduces areas of interest that are related to distance learning, and most appropriately developed in this chapter, including the need for deeper levels of understanding of the distance leaning experience. These related topics are lifelong learning and personal development.

Distance Learning

Before we explore distance learning, I'd like to begin by defining classroom and other types of non-distance education. In this way, we can have a more complete picture of the learning world, and of how distance learning fits into the whole system.

Gillard (1991, p. 17) uses the words "proximal and contiguous" to describe "conventional education." Weisberg and Ullmer (1995) write that the "conventional way or classroom model" (p. 629) is learning that occurs in a "specified location during a fixed time-frame" (p. 634). Since a) there does not seem to be general agreement that the classroom model is the customary or conventional practice in the educational scene and b) we must

recognize the imaginative changes in classroom techniques that adopt tools that are used in the distance model, it is difficult to accurately define the classroom model. However, it would be consistent with existing practice to say that classroom-based learning aims to specify spatiality and temporality.

On the other hand, Maxwell (1995, p. 43), Perraton (1988, as cited in Sherry, 1996, p. 3), Keegan (1986, as cited in Sherry, 1996, p. 3), and Garrison and Shale (1987, as cited in Sherry, 1996, p. 3), all describe distance education as being noncontiguous. As well, with today's technology, distance education now has the option to be connected in time.

Wagner (1993, as cited in Maxwell, 1995) defines distance education as the "transmission of interactive educational or instructional programming to geographically dispersed individuals and groups" (p. 45). On the other hand, Murray (1990) points out that although students work on "materials without the presence of a teacher … geographical separation between student and teacher is not essential. For example, a course that was completely self-instructed via computer-assisted instruction (CAI) on-campus is considered a distance education course" (p. 123).

There is consensus, however, from all the above authors, plus notable others, that distance education involves a partial physical separateness between the learner and the instructor/facilitator/tutor (Holmberg, 1981, as cited in Kaufman and Mugridge, 1986, p. 296; Holmberg, as cited in Clark and Verduin, 1989, p. 24; Peters, as cited in Clark and Verduin, 1989, p. 24; Perraton, 1988, as cited in Sherry, 1996; McLaren and Penrod, 1995, p. 262). Besides some physical separateness, another common factor accepted by distance education writers is that distance education involves technical media.

Weisberg and Ullmer (1995, p. 629) distinguishes between distance education and distance learning by separating "the organizational apparatus and process for providing educational experiences to people at a distance" (distance education), from "the process and result of attending to, and responding to, such experiences" (distance learning). After considering the many definitions that have developed throughout the years and Keegan's (1991) detailed analysis of the subject, I have decided to incorporate both of Weisberg's aspects in the one term, distance learning.

Gillard (1991, p. 17) has had a strong influence on my definition of distance learning. Gillard appealed to us to reconsider the negative connotations attached to distance learning definitions and asked us to examine assumptions made about the differences between the "conventional way" and the "distance way." His earnest request led to my personal understanding of distance learning as a system that incorporates two processes: (a) individualized learning activities and (b) intercommunicative processes, both of which involve technologically mediated transactions of interactive learning.

"For long the Cinderella of the education spectrum, distance education emerged in the 1970s with a changed image" (Keegan, 1991, p. 4). Some of the major reasons for this improvement are:

1. A changing attitude that challenges educational programs to re-examine such issues as:

- The diversification of programs needed for the development of individual opportunity (Kohl, 1992, pp. 16, 55; Maxwell, 1995, p. 43; Spencer, 1995, p. 90).
- Flexibility with respect to time and space (Maxwell, 1995, p. 43; Weisberg and Ullmer, 1995, p. 634).

- Learning models and styles (Berge and Collins, 1995, p. 5).
- The expanding awareness of global conditions (Weisberg and Ullmer, 1995, p. 629; Heimstra and Sisco, 1990, p. 7).
- The definition of "literacy" from subject knowledge to process knowledge, that is, the need to learn how to learn (Weisberg and Ullmer, 1995, p. 634).
- A knowledge society that requires lifelong learning (Drucker, 1993, p. 201; Kohl, 1992, p. 16, 44).
- The constant change in the form, content, meaning, and responsibility of knowledge, and what it means to be an educated person (Drucker, 1993, p. 218; Weisberg and Ullmer, 1995, p. 635).
- A learner's needs being prioritized over an institution's convenience (Kohl, 1992, p. 26).
- Teaching roles (Berge and Collins, 1995, p. 4; Maxwell, 1995, p. 43).

2. The growing demand for diversified learning programs, opportunities and educational delivery formats (Kohl, 1992, pp. 16, 31; Maxwell, 1995, p. 43; Kaufman and Mugridge, 1986, p. 35).

3. The growing demand for learning opportunities that allow people to stay in their work and home environment, and consequently, the increased acceptance of distance learning as a conventional and normal method of learning (Kohl, 1992, p. 26; Heimstra and Sisco, 1990, p. 137).

4. Advancements in the production, use and presentation of printed materials.

5. The development and public acceptance of new, more economical and continually

developing communications technology (Kohl, 1992, p. 15; Kaufman and Mugridge, 1986, p. 3; Open Learning Agency, 1992, p. 24; Heimstra and Sisco, 1990, p. 7).

6. The decrease of manual labour (Drucker, 1993, p. 40) and the subsequent increase of knowledge work (p. 83), and the development of knowledge and information (p. 183) as the resource base in the business and service world.

7. The growth of privatized educational opportunities, and consequently, the competitive atmosphere in the provision of student services.

8. A political trend that is re-examining educational structures (Open Learning Agency, 1992, p. 21).

9. Globalization issues and their influence within the educational network (Open Learning Agency, 1992, p. 5; Heimstra and Sisco, 1990, p. 7).

10. The development and growing awareness of quality distance learning programs, such as, the Open University, UK, and Athabasca University, Canada (Spencer, 1995, p. 7).

11. Improved provision of and knowledge about support services for distance learners.

12. The growing "distance" between student and teacher in face-to-face classrooms (Wedemeyer, 1981, as cited in Keegan, 1991, p. 59).

As these developments occur, we ask, what role does distance learning have in our learning world? There are a variety of reasons why adults pursue learning at a distance:

1. The recognition of learning as a lifelong process and the consequent need for greater access and flexibility (Kaufman and Mugridge, 1986, p. 35; Clark and Verduin, 1989, p. 26).

2. Distance (Kohl, 1992, p. 22; Sherry, 1996, p. 12).

3. Capacity to serve people with disabilities (Heimstra and Sisco, 1990, p. 28, 153; McLaren and Penrod, 1995, p. 261).

4. Constraints of time (Sherry, 1996, p. 12).

5. Opportunity for increased educational equality or equity (Kohl, 1992, p. 26; Spencer, 1995, p. 96, 101; Knapper, 1988, p. 65; McLaren and Penrod, 1995, p. 262).

6. Improving self-esteem (Wilson, J. M., 1997; Obringer, B. J. and Newlon, B. J., 1986, p. 12; Little, 1995, pp. 6-9, 15; Heimstra and Sisco, 1990, p. 28, 162; Knapper, 1988, p. 65).

7. Desire for asynchronous instruction (Wilson, 1997, p. 13).

8. The need to accommodate one's learning situation with a mobile spouse (Obringer and Newlon, 1986).

9. Finances (Sherry, 1996, p. 12; Cuskelly and Dekkers, 1991).

10. Need or desire for part-time learning opportunities (Kohl, 1992, p. 24).

11. Opportunity to gain new knowledge and to acquire new social skills by communicating and collaborating with widely dispersed colleagues and peers (Sherry, 1996, p. 12).

12. Opportunity to take courses or hear speakers who would otherwise be unavailable (Sherry, 1996, p. 12).

13. Ability to come in contact with students from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds (Sherry, 1996, p. 12).

Has the distance learning system been responsive to the dynamic nature of the learning processes in the world? The number of distance education systems has increased, and continues to increase at a proliferating rate (Kohl, 1992, p. 15; Heimstra and Sisco, 1990, p. 137). In a 1995 national survey, Dillman, Christenson, Salant and Warner reported that additional education and training is important to be successful at work, and that lifelong

learning is not only a reality, but also the norm. "The most important finding of this study is that regardless of age, income, race, and ethnicity, the great majority" (p. 10) of their sample population seem "to reflect the pressures of working in a knowledge-based economy" (p. 3), and "want to continue their education and training" (p. 10). Dillman et al. further conclude in their findings that the traditional "classroom does not meet the public's demand for tailored educational services" (p. 3). They recommend distance education strategies to overcome the barriers to learning (p. 3).

What do we know about the distance learning world that directly affects learners by removing barriers in this way? This is an important question that has attracted the interest of many educators and researchers. Woodley (1993), for instance, wanted "to assess the actual and potential contribution of distance education for the disaffected adult" (p. 110). His conclusions centered on the need for teaching styles and support systems that give special consideration to:

1. All aspects of the system that enable learners to acquire and sustain feelings of confidence and self-esteem.
2. Convenient scheduling.
3. A balance between flexibility and structure.
4. Well-designed courses (pp. 122-133).

Sherry (1996) wrote that the "most important factors for successful distance learning is a caring, concerned teacher who is confident, experienced, at ease with the equipment, uses the media creatively, and maintains a high level of interactivity with the students" (p. 7). Interactivity includes the connectivity between students, teachers, facilitators, and peers.

Faure (as cited in Knapper, 1988) says that learning is "from life, for life, and throughout life" (p. 65). He proposed that learning is a means of self-actualization, and further that we should be trying to instill in the classroom the independent study approaches that distance learners are forced to adopt out of necessity. Wheatley (1994) expresses the challenge that faces the learning world, "How do we create structures that move with change, that are flexible and adaptive, even boundaryless, that enable rather than constrain? ... In new science, the underlying currents are a movement toward holism, toward understanding the system as a system and giving primary value to the relationships that exist among seemingly discrete parts" (pp. 8-9). Distance and classroom learning are parts of the total learning process system. The total system is in the process of letting go its present form and is reemerging with properties that can support growth and coherence, individuality and community. The learning system is relational; we live in a world of constant change. Consequently, lifelong learning is a reality and the parts of the system that support lifelong learning and remove its barriers will survive.

As you can see from this overview, there is an undeniable connection between distance learning and lifelong learning. We continue this review by looking at aspects of lifelong learning.

Lifelong Learning

Drucker (as cited in Weisberg and Ullmer, 1995, p. 634) says that an educated person will be someone who has learned how to learn and who continues to learn throughout his or her lifetime.

Jarvis (1995) contends that lifelong education and lifelong learning are fundamentally different concepts (pp. 1 and 26). Lifelong education involves a "planned series of incidents" (p. 25), which are directed toward the participant's learning and understanding. It can be said, however, that learning may not necessarily play a dominant role in the education process. The concept of lifelong education requires an implementation process, which can be demonstrated through such programs as continuing education, recurrent education and community education. Although the following text in this subtopic explains some of differences between lifelong learning and lifelong education, both concepts are intimately connected. In this thesis, the narratives describe experiences that were situated within an educational context, but the meaning of being a distance learner may involve both the planned incidents (educational process) and the broader notion of discovery (learning process).

Lifelong learning can include an educational element (formal, nonformal or informal in nature) that is both instructive and enlightening. Further, lifelong learning enhances the quality of life of individuals because it is associated with personal, social and/or professional development. The theory of learning views adults as developing selves, and begins with experience. Consequently, "the relationship between the adults' biographies and their understanding of their human situation is important" (Jarvis, 1995, p. 82). Admittedly, there are occasions when individuals do not wish to learn, even if the opportunities and experiences present themselves.

Ironside (as cited in Titmus [Ed.], 1989) writes that lifelong education is "the organized provision of" sequential learning opportunities. In contrast, he quotes Gross: "lifelong learning means self-directed growth. It means [further] understanding yourself and the

world. It means acquiring new skills and powers.... It means investment in yourself. Lifelong learning means the joy of discovering..., the delight of becoming aware..., the fun of creating something, alone or with other people" (p. 15).

According to Cropley (1989), lifelong education is a system with financial, organizational, administrative, and instructional procedures intended to foster lifelong learning, and does not necessarily include the spontaneous, everyday learning of ordinary life. Lifelong education is "deliberate and goal oriented learning" (p. 526), and involves the influences which guide or encourage learning. Cropley (1980) defines learning as something which lasts a lifetime, meaning it is "'lifelong', and is also related to the whole range of influences people encounter in the course of living their lives (it is 'lifewide')" (p. 2). Cropley (1980) adds that learning is a "process of change occurring within people as a result of experience" (p. 2-3). Cropley uses the terms, lifelong learning, lifelong education and lifewide learning.

It is my contention that the concept of education requires participation or enrollment in a predetermined activity, or embarking in a planned program, and that learning encompasses a broader concept because learning involves the whole process of living. If one studies the etymological background of education and training, both these words relate to the provision of instruction or schooling. On the other hand, learning implies not only imparting knowledge to someone or teaching, but also learning means acquiring knowledge.

This thesis deals with the concept of lifelong learning. A lot of the literature, however, does not yet distinguish between the terms, lifelong education, lifewide learning, and lifelong learning. Therefore, the three terms will be used interchangeably. Personally, I subscribe to Dave's (1976) definition for lifelong learning:

> a process of accomplishing personal, social and professional development throughout the life-span of individuals in order to enhance the quality of life of both individuals and their collectives. It is a comprehensive and unifying idea which includes formal, non-formal and informal learning for acquiring and enhancing enlightenment so as to attain the fullest possible development in different stages and domains of life. It is connected with both individual growth and social progress. That is why ideas such as "learning to be" and "learning society" or an "educative society" are associated with this concept (p. 34).

"In a constantly evolving, dynamic universe, information is the fundamental ingredient, the key source of structuration—the process of creating structure" (Wheatley, 1994, p. 104). Through lifelong learning, people keep in touch with "information." The distance learning system can be one of the elements that can give form to the unfolding of a lifelong learning process (Open Learning Agency, 1992). We now have the technology to generate ways of connecting with the world of information that is associative, networked, heuristic, relational, and nonlinear. Adult educators cannot ignore the educational applications of technology.

> The tools that can support and advance the goals of adult learning are a part of everyday life and are used by millions of adults on a daily basis. [Imel recommends that] adult educators become proactive in developing opportunities that will provide advantages for adult learners…[They should] ensure that the focus is on the learning and not the technology. 'The spotlight should first fall on the conditions, dynamics and outcomes of learner activity, in ways that promote learner self-esteem and their competence as proactive learners' (Burge and Roberts, 1993, p. 37)" (Imel, 1998, pp. 4-5).

I agree that information is a fundamental ingredient in our dynamic world, but it is further important to realize that the full nature of learning includes the self in relationship to information and to the tools that give access to knowledge.

Let us consider Maslow's needs, not as a hierarchy, but as a nonlinear process, where all the needs (physiological, safety, love and belonging, learning, self-esteem, and self-actualization) exist in individuals and that, wherever possible, human beings seek to satisfy them (Jarvis, 1995, pp. 13-14). In this respect, not only can we attribute the need for lifelong learning to the nature of contemporary society and economics (identified by rapid social and cultural change, rapid and continuing developments in technical knowledge, increased leisure time, and an increasing number of people living into old age), but we can also say that it is in the nature of humanity to need to learn. The provision of lifelong learning opportunities is therefore required in order to contribute to the development of the professional, intellectual, emotional, and personal potentialities of individuals and to the community at large (Lengrand, as cited in Titmus, 1989, p. 6; Dave, 1976, p. 187; Thomas, 1991, p. 160; Lengrand, 1975, p. 48). In addition, theorists such as Mezirow, Rogers and Freire (Jarvis, 1995) emphasize the humanistic concerns of adult education and promote experiential learning as central to their considerations (p. 99).

Lengrand (1989) examines "what lifelong education means" (pp. 6-8), and he uses various interrelated elements to describe lifelong learning. As already noted, there are the personal, communal and humanistic reasons for pursuing and providing lifelong learning opportunities. These latter opportunities require educational processes aligned to a truer understanding of life and its different phases (Lengrand, 1975, p. 52). Lengrand (1989) concludes that there is no "age limit for education", and since "education is a way of life" (p.

7), he believes that structures are necessary in order to combat people's sense of failure. There needs to be adequate educational opportunities so that people can choose to be involved in a continuous process of learning. In this way, people "do not become failures, they merely have had a failure among others in their lives; … success is also relative and applies to one in a series of undertakings which may or may not prove successful" (p. 7). Lengrand adds that an "important consequence of lifelong education is that it will, to a far greater extent than traditional education, reveal the originality of each individual" (p. 7).

Adults seek diversified methods and areas of learning to reflect and express the development of their personality. Consequently, lifelong learning requires structures that provide a variety of options for people, more than might be available from local resources. "[T]he principles of lifelong education offer clear orientations for the educational reforms which must be made if …action is to be vigorous, intelligent, and constructive" (Lengrand, 1989, p. 8). It is my contention that in 1999 the increased development of distance learning has been part of the educational reforms, and part of the "vigorous, intelligent, and constructive action" that has facilitated lifelong learning. If we go to Lengrand's study of the significance of lifelong education, we find him saying that "under pressure from internal needs and as an answer to external needs", education's true significance is "the development of the individual, attaining increasing self-realization" (Lengrand, 1975, p. 50). Lengrand sees the responsibilities of education as providing structures and methods that assist lifelong learning, and as equipping individuals for opportunities of self-education. I believe that distance learning played its role in accepting these responsibilities, and continues to contribute significantly toward the growth of lifelong learning and personal development.

Mackeracher (1989) studies "lifespan learning" (p. 187) from another perspective, that of personal experiences which influence the development of the set of meanings and values (structures), and a set of skills and strategies (processes). The structures and processes are a set of personal constructs, a dynamic system with fundamental characteristics that are critical to the learning process. The overall system strives to maintain personal integrity. Mackeracher concludes by stating how important it is for educators to heighten self-esteem. Dave (1976) agrees with Mackeracher (p. 350), as does Mezirow (as cited in Cropley, 1976) who believes that meaning structures have cognitive, conative and affective dimensions (p. 196). Mezirow (1989) questions how adult learners can validate meaning and learning structures and uses Jurgen Habermas' argument that "validation is only possible through a consensus—ideally, openly arrived at through free, full participation of informed, objective, and rational persons in a continuing dialogue" (p. 197). Mezirow feels this kind of discourse suits a learning society committed to lifelong learning. (Note: this thesis uses a dialogue method to validate its data.)

Lifelong learning continues to arouse great interest among educational writers, "although recognition of the fact that people learn throughout their lives is by no means new" (Cropley, 1980, p. 1). Considering the varied perspectives and interests about lifelong learning, it becomes obvious that it is a system with complex elements in mutual interaction. I would agree with Walker (as cited in Cropley, 1980) that the "system theory provides a promising foundation for approaching the question of the administration of lifelong education" (p. 145). I would add that among the rich and diverse resources needed to serve the learning community, distance learning, as part of the lifelong learning system is also best examined with a systems approach. Within this context, a systems approach means that when any

system is studied, no variables are excluded from the study. For instance, when distance learning is examined, all elements of the distance learning world are included in the discovery process. Within the distance learning system is the distance learner, and we should further our understanding of the lived experiences of distance learners if we are trying to know more about the parts of the lifelong learning system. "Each individual is both a transmitter and a receiver of continuous stimuli for and from other individuals," (Thomas, 1991, p. 8), and an expansion from this concept is the realization that learners are valuable transmitters of knowledge for educators. "Unless an educator is particularly resistant to information or hostile to change, he can no longer ignore the complexity of human beings or the factors involved in the development of the personality" (Lengrand, 1975, p. 110). "The principal agent of education is no longer the ... teacher, the instructor. It is the individual in the process of education. It is he who develops, it is he who transforms himself, it is he who actualises his potentiality..." (p. 111). Therefore, in order to understand lifelong learning, we must understand the learner, and the learner needs the "elements and tools which will enable him or her to continue the quest of knowledge throughout life and so always to move forward" (p. 112).

Personal Development

The whole concept of lifelong learning opens the area of personal development and growth. Development can be initiated from experiences that vary from extreme happiness to utter pain. In this study and within the context of distance learning, the diversity of feelings associated within our lifeworld is not classified as either positive or negative. All

experiences are meant *to be understood as they are lived. What that understanding provides* to learners, educators, or any reader is dependent upon the reader's situation.

After you read the co-researchers' narratives, you will see why I include within this topic of personal growth the definition of self-esteem. Branden (1994) is convinced that "self-esteem is the disposition to experience oneself as competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and as worthy of happiness" (p. 27). Branden (1997) states that the key elements of self-esteem are self-efficacy, self-respect, and development in such areas as independence, self-reliance, self-trust, plus the capacity to exercise initiative (p. 1).

In his discussion of the practice of learning to learn, Krupp (1991) writes that "Those with high esteem take risks, lead or follow as need demands, remain humble, care deeply about humanity, are confident, and appreciate their own worth" (p. 14).

From a behaviourist approach, self-esteem "is the extent to which a person feels positive or negative about certain characteristics of himself" (Burns, 1986, p. 12). These characteristics are hypothesized and specified on self-evaluation tests. Coopersmith (1967, as cited in Burns, 1986) refers to self-esteem as "the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy" (p. 55). Rosenberg (1965, as cited in Burns, 1986), defines self-esteem as a positive or negative attitude toward oneself (p. 55). Self-esteem, according to Brisset (1972, as cited in Burns, 1986), encompasses "(a) the process of self-evaluation and (b) the process of self-worth" (p. 55). As early as 1890, James referred to self-esteem as the ability to diminish the ratio between actual accomplishments and aspirations, that is, the actualization of ideals (as cited in Burns, 1986, p. 56). Besides a conscious self-evaluation, self-esteem involves the internalization of how others evaluate you (Cooley, 1912, as cited in Burns, 1986, p. 56; Mead, 1934, as cited in Burns, 1986, p. 56).

Burns adds that self-esteem also includes an evaluation of the effectiveness in doing what one's societal identity or role entails (p. 56). Burns sums up that self-concept is dynamic and complex, and is the "process in which the individual examines his performance, capacities and attributes according to his personal standards and values, which have been internalized from society and significant others" (p. 68). In more recent writings, the conclusions are the same, appraisal of our behaviour matters to self-conceptions, and a "competence self-concept is an important source of self-esteem" (Novick, Cauce and Grove, 1996, p. 245).

Sears and Sherman (1964) say that "self-esteem is defined as possession of a favorable opinion of the self, or a favorable self-concept" (p. 10). In this thesis, I will follow Marsh's (as cited in Bracken, 1996) notion that self-esteem and self-concept are used interchangeably (p. 59). In summary, I'll conclude that self-esteem is a person's perceptions of self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-respect as they are developed through a person's lived experiences. Elements within these lived experiences that influence one's development of self-esteem are (a) environmental situations, (b) interrelationships, (c) individual aspirations, and (d) the ability/opportunity to self-actualize.

Developing Connections

Distance learning connects us to lifelong learning, and lifelong learning leads us to personal development, which includes a discussion on self-concept. We will now investigate these connections a little further through the existing literature. Murphy points out that self-actualization does not imply one potential self, but rather self-actualization entails the realization of multiple potentials (Frick, 1989, pp. 70-71). Rogers, in a dialogue with Skinner, says, "one of the essential bases for maximizing the human potential is to make

continually available the opportunity and the necessity of choice" (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1989, p. 151). As presented earlier, it is the intent of distance learning to provide opportunity and choice within the learning system. In so doing, distance learning enhances the opportunities of the total learning system to cater to multiple potentials. "Human beings often resent being rubricized or classified, which can be seen by them as a denial of their individuality (self, identity)" (Maslow, 1968, p. 130). Lifelong learning is a way for us to express our uniqueness, to grow with the changes in our lives. The "theory of how to help men become what they can" (p. 189) means we cannot repress a person's development by lack of opportunity. With this in mind, we can see distance learning as a vehicle to travel through the lifelong learning journey with personal development as the goal.

We seem to have a symbiotic relationship. Distance learning, by expanding the opportunities to learn, can foster personal development. For example, using a constant comparative method of analyses, Little's (1995) findings indicate that lifelong learning is associated with repairing or enhancing self-esteem, and helps people to stay mentally active and to develop a mature sense of caring for both self and others. The conclusion of Little's study is that there is a need to promote the value of education for people of all ages, and that education should be seen as a continuing process that facilitates development and growth regardless of age. Underlying this view to interconnect learning and personal development is that self-concept is "developed by the individual through interaction with the environment and reflecting on that interaction. This dynamic aspect of self-concept (and by corollary, self-esteem) is important because it indicates that it can be modified or changed" (Bishops College, 1997, p. 1).

Gibson (1996) studied the relationship between academic self-concept and distance education, and concludes that:

1. Academic self-concept plays an important role in distance education.

2. This facet of general self-concept is a dynamic and situational attribute of the distance learner that is amenable to intervention. Institutional practices can affect this all-important variable through simple modifications in educational practices that can potentially enhance the learner's success in academic pursuits (pp. 34-35).

"Self-esteem appears to be a key variable in implementing educational interventions" (Heimstra and Sisco, 1990, p. 162). Not only is a person's success in academic pursuits affected by educational practices, but many other facets of a person's life are influenced by variables within the educational system. "It would seem that the self-concept is a ubiquitous and integral part of any learning situation" (Burns, 1986, p. 310). A wholistic approach which addresses the total needs of the educational system, a system that provides diversified opportunities for continuous learning, is required. The "information society and other social changes create demands for … education and training [which, in turn] create new demands on psychological resources" (Branden, 1990, abstract). This relationship is one of "reciprocal causation … behaviors that cause good self-esteem are also expressions of good self-esteem" (p. 22). Lifelong learning and its educational assistant, distance learning, can promote growth and personal development, and self-esteem can cultivate lifelong learning. Branden (1971) believes that self-esteem is central to human motivation and behaviour, and that self-esteem has the most intimate connection to mental health and psychological well-being (preface, p. 87).

Phenomenological hermeneutic research that attempts to further our understanding of the learning world also explores another important area of study, a person's sense of well-being, and its relation to learning at a distance. If a person decides that "no further learning is necessary, … he has decided, *in fact*, that he has 'lived enough.' Stagnant passivity and self-esteem are incompatible" (Branden, 1976, p. 130).

Will the study of lived experiences of distance learners also show a connection to lifelong learning and personal development, as the literature seems to indicate? Human science research can often surprise us because we should remain open to research findings that lead to new and unanticipated findings and understandings. What is human science research? Why is it appropriate to use a qualitative approach for this study? What is phenomenological hermeneutic research?

Qualitative Human Science Research

Within the realm of human science research, one can use various study methods. Of the diverse qualitative methodologies available, the one of choice for this thesis is the phenomenological hermeneutic method. The following explains what human science inquiry is and describes the essential qualities of qualitative research. This discussion leads us to the next subtopic of this chapter, which explains what hermeneutic phenomenology is and why the phenomenological hermeneutic method is a particularly appropriate tool to use for the study of the phenomenon of being a distance learner.

Human science research focusses on the explication of meaning: "descriptive-interpretive studies of patterns, structures and levels of experiential and/or textual meanings" (van Manen, 1990, p. 181).

Qualitative research is inquiry which promotes an understanding of "the complex interrelationships among all that exists" (Stake, 1995, p. 37), and its orientation toward personal interpretation emphasizes a wholistic treatment of phenomena (Stake, 1995, pp. 35-48; Pytlik, 1997, p. 20; Sjoberg and Nett, 1968, p. 290). "The dependent variables are experientially rather than operationally defined. Situational conditions are not known in advance or controlled. Even the independent variables are expected to develop in unexpected ways" (Stake, 1995, p. 41). In phenomenological hermeneutic study, there are no preconceived variables and no variables are excluded. We welcome ourselves into an open environment, with a sense of discovery, wonder and appreciation. The tone is one of constructive critical analysis.

In this particular study, qualitative research seeks themes (unanticipated as well as expected relationships) within phenomena, and uses a subjective research paradigm. As a science of understanding, qualitative research seeks the understanding of meaning (Sokolovsky, 1996, p. 282-283) and studies the essential character of something (Kvale, 1996, p. 67).

Why a qualitative approach for this particular thesis?

A wholistic contextual perspective on distance learning focusses on "the interconnectiveness of reality and the concept of wholeness, as distinct from reductionism and fragmentation" (Burge, 1991, p. 12). Qualitative research is a wholistic approach, which encompasses the nature of being (ontology), and within the nature of knowledge (epistemology), qualitative research includes both physical data as well as subjective experience. "Strategies specifically related to adult wholistic learning are gaining increasing attention (Maxfield, 1990; Griffin, 1990, 1989; Smith, 1988; Samples, 1987; Melamed, 1987;

Ferguson, 1987) ... (E)ducators have to confront such issues as the potentially inhibiting effects of self-concept and self-esteem in situations of growth or change, especially in cases in which new cognitive and affective connections are possible only by jettisoning old ones" (Burge, 1991, p. 16).

Quantitative research gives methods of obtaining partial answers to research questions. What is lacking in quantitative analysis "is any real feeling for the experience of adults as they engage in learning projects" (Harrison, 1993, p. 12). Although numbers, statistics, scales, factor analyses, surveys, the use of pre-arranged categories of response, and methods that focus on "count value" serve their purpose, a qualitative, interpretive approach (descriptions, narratives) gives insight into the subjective experience for all participants in the world under study, not excluding the subjects from whom data is collected. This insight allows participants "to develop their own theories and interpretations of themselves as learners" (p. 13). Narrative analysis, for example, as opposed to pre-arranged categories of response, allows participants the "freedom and time to unfold their own stories" (Kvale, 1996, p. 130), and promotes interaction, which keeps the conversation flowing in order to motivate participation to talk about their experiences and feelings. A quantitative researcher tries to remain aloof. A qualitative researcher has a "commitment to get close, to be factual (understand the depth and details), descriptive, and quotive" (Patton, 1997, p. 274). Quotive means that the world under study is described and interpreted as lived, that is, the researcher enters the situation with a deliberate effort to put aside any presuppositions and to begin the process without any preconceived hypotheses.

The qualitative study of people in situ is a process of discovery where the process does not begin with a "pre-post focus of change" (Patton, 1997, p. 274), but with a dynamic,

ongoing view of change (p. 273). The qualitative researcher's role is to find out what is "fundamental or central to the people or world under" (p. 274) study. Quantitative research is an experimental, fixed, controlled design, which is linear and sequential, and aims for generalizations. "It is easy to count the minutes a student spends reading in class, but what does reading mean to the student? **Different kinds of problems require different types of data**" (p. 275).

To further understand what it means to be a distance learner, statistics are not enough; hence, this study focuses on different types of data and interpretive tools. We need a naturalistic inquiry method with a wholistic perspective focused on the interdependencies, and with emergent, flexible designs. "Naturalistic inquiry aims at understanding actualities, social realities, and human perceptions that exist … (It) attempts to present 'slice-of-life' episodes documented through natural language and representing as closely as possible how people feel, what they know, and what their concerns, beliefs, perceptions, and understanding are" (Wolf and Tynitz (1976-77: 6), as cited in Patton, 1997, p. 278). This study requires a naturalistic inquiry method because I want to minimize research manipulation and study a phenomenon within and in relation to its total context. Phenomenological hermeneutics searches "for deeper meanings through reflection thinking [in order] to capture and understand the core essence of something, to transform doubt to understanding and understanding into further action" (Andrusyszyn and Davie, 1997, p. 105). Looking beyond this study I envision phenomenological hermeneutics as a methodology that discovers important questions and variables, and thereby leads to further study that uses deductive hypothesis testing, and is then followed by inductive analysis in order to examine explanations and unanticipated factors.

Quantitative research investigates a "singular reality, thus the importance of objectivity" (Patton, 1997, p. 281). The qualitative paradigm "searches for perspectives and understanding in a world of multiple 'realities', thus the inevitability of subjectivity" (Patton, 1997, p. 281 and Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 163). I have used the words subjective and subjectivity often and these concepts need clarification. In some worldviews, it is not possible to attain objectivity in any absolute sense, and subjectivity can have negative connotations. It would be better to realize that researchers aim for "*fairness, neutrality,* and *impartiality*" (Patton, 1997, p. 282). In this particular study it is appropriate to consider intersubjectivity as the essence of interaction. Objectivism implies that a reality exists independently of the observer, that only one correct view can be taken of it (Kvale, 1996, p. 66; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 163). I say, "implies", because can you really isolate all variables ("the researcher is a variable in the research design" (Sjoberg and Nett, 1968, p. ix), and do you even want to avoid all variables in some circumstances? Do we always want to narrow ourselves to one point of view, to a standard, and thereby exclude an open approach that allows uniqueness and diversity? On the other hand, relativism involves a view that all concepts of knowledge or reality are relative to something else. Between these polarities is a hermeneutical approach that uses dialogue. True knowledge is sought through discourse. The result is an intersubjective approach, "neither objective or universal, nor subjective or individual" (p. 66). (For a further definition of intersubjectivity, see chapter three, subtopic objectivity.) The important element is to guard against corruption of an evaluation. Patton quotes "Ethics is not something for a special occasion; it is part of daily practice" (Newman and Brown, 1996: 187, as cited in Patton, 1997, p. 365).

Having first defined human science research, discussed naturalistic inquiry, and explained why a naturalistic inquiry and qualitative approach is appropriate for this study, it follows that I should now explain why a phenomenological hermeneutic approach is a useful and interesting methodological choice for this thesis.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the science of phenomena. It was Husserl who initiated a descriptive method to phenomenology, making it a "discipline that endeavours to describe how the world is constituted and experienced through conscious acts" (van Manen, 1990, p. 184). In 1970, Husserl introduced the concept of *lifeworld*, the everyday world from which developed existential phenomenology. The latter aims at "describing how phenomena presents itself in lived experience, in human existence" (p. 184).

Heidegger (as cited in van Manen, 1990) then proposed phenomenology as ontology (branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of being), that is, "a study of the modes of 'being in the world' of human being" (p. 184). The aim is to let "things of the world speak for themselves" (p. 184). Merleau-Ponty (as cited in van Manen, 1990) differentiates phenomenology from ethnography, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology; he proposed that phenomenology is the study of essences, not appearance (p. 184). Thus, phenomenology questions the nature, the meaning of something, and requires looking at the world as we meet it in lived experience. Phenomenological accounts are narratives of "experienced space, time, body, and human relations as we live them" (p. 184).

Phenomenology is the science of phenomena that describes lived experience, free from pre-conceived notions. Phenomenology aims to comprehend the phenomenon, and "to resolve philosophical problems on experiential grounds, *seeing* the things themselves, moving from abstract schemata to the fullness and depth of the sphere of life." ... [It is not] reductive description of realities, [but rather it is] about the meaning of existents and about being as the presupposition for (study) carried out by empirical science" (Dodd, 1996, p. 16).

Hermeneutics is the science, methodology, theory and practice of interpretation. (van Manen, 1990, p. 179-180; *The American Heritage ® Dictionary of the English Language*, (1996); Dodd, 1996.)

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a methodology which is descriptive (phenomenological), and interpretive (hermeneutic). In addition, hermeneutic phenomenology demands a textual presentation of the lived experience as an interpretive process. Van Manen (1990) states, "human science meaning can only be communicated textually – by way of organized narrative or prose" (p. 78). In order to effect a direct contact with the experience of distance learning as lived by a distance learner, I can (a) live the experience myself, and (b) I can live the experience through other distance learners and use phenomenological reflection and explication as a tool to further the understanding of being a distance learner. Phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry focusses on the essence of a phenomenon, which is needed if we are to increase our knowledge about what Rothe (1985) describes as first-order constructs.

Rothe (1985) explains the difference between first and second-order constructs. An example of second-order constructs are criteria such as appeal, readability, and structures of

content of distance learning materials, formulated on hypotheses or pre-existing models. Second-order constructs stress such areas as curriculum design and technique. What is underlying the second-order constructs are first-order constructs such as beliefs, values, assumptions, and plans. Rothe (1985) suggests that a phenomenological analysis is best suited to examine first-order constructs in the distance learning system (p. 2). Rothe says that "critical sense-making through the use of a phenomenological framework serves as the interpretive lens for describing first-order constructs supporting distance education programs. The framework provides the concepts from which questions can be generated for inquiring into the foundations of programs. ... It helps distance educators become aware of wider possible consequences a program may have. They can better judge the appropriateness of a program for their student clientele" (p. 17).

Not only is the phenomenological hermeneutic method an appropriate tool for the study of the phenomenon of being a distance learner, it is a method that is in tune with my personal preferences, that is, an investigation method that involves the principle of collaborative inquiry. A collaborative approach offers "a way of involving the participants as more than just subjects to be researched" (Campbell, 1998, p. 4). The "complexity of the student and his or her ability to reflect upon experience are recognised" (Morgan, 1984, p. 254). My intent is not to aim for explanation or control (as a quantitative researcher does), but rather "for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists" (Stake, 1995, p. 37). Consequently, participants in the study are not called subjects, but rather, they are co-researchers. Further, by collaboration, I mean that the principle co-researcher and the co-researchers work together with a true spirit of respect for each other's input into the study.

Hermeneutic phenomenology embodies certain major concepts, such as lived meaning, essence, lifeworld, and being. This terminology is briefly explained below.

"Lived meaning refers to the way a person experiences and understands his or her world as real and meaningful. Lived meanings describe those aspects of a situation as experienced by the person in it" (van Manen, 1990, p. 183). For example, a distance educator may want to understand how a distance learner meaningfully experiences or lives a distance learning situation, and asks the distance learner to describe the experience of being a distance learner.

This study attempts to understand the experiences through which participants in distance learning live. With "understanding" as the goal, there is no preferred or superior version of the distance experience. Some participants may not finish a distance learning course or program, may not like distance learning, or may look back upon their experience with dissatisfaction. Others may find distance learning convenient, may find that distance learning suits their learning style, or may find that as a distance learner they develop helpful skills, etc. All experiences are legitimate lived experiences, needing to be understood. What do the descriptions of lifeworld experiences tell us about distance learning? This study attempts to answer that question.

Essence is the crucial "whatness" of something that identifies the very nature, the inner quality, the true being of a thing (Manen, 1990, p. 177). Explaining *Eidos (Wesen* or essence), Patočka (as cited in Dodd, 1996) quotes from Husserl:

> An individual object is not merely an individual object as such, a "This is here," object never repeatable; as qualified "*in itself*" thus and so, it has its *own specific character*, its stock of *essential* predicables which must belong to it (as an "existent such as it is in itself") ... (p. 73).

Patočka then adds:

> Every eidetic *whatness* can be "transposed into an idea" so that the intuition of the individual passes over into an intuition of an *eidos,* that is, of something universal (p. 73). According to Husserl it is *eidos* that fulfills "the task of providing a basis for empirical knowledge (p. 79).

When trying to understand the meaning of essence, it is helpful to think of the expression "in essence", which means "by nature" or essentially. For example: "*He is in essence a reclusive sort*" (*The American Heritage ® Dictionary of the English Language*, 1996). A phenomenologist investigating the essence of being a distance learner pursues the basic, fundamental, ideal essence, that is, the internal principal or essential nature that governs (that by which something is what it is) a distance learner. What is in distance learning that has a determining influence in uniquely identifying distance learning? What are the intrinsic properties that serve to characterize a distance learner?

Lifeworld is the "original natural life", that is, the "world of immediate experience" (Husserl as cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 182). It is the lived experience before critical or theoretical reflection. Premature theorizing can interrupt our sense of wonder at things being just the way they are, before reflection, and hinders our ability to seize the meaning of the world. Each lifeworld presents structures or themes that can be studied. Lifeworld is a person's everyday lived experience and his or her relation to it (Kvale, 1996, p. 30).

From the human science research approach, "being" is Heidegger's (as cited in van Manen, 1990) fundamental term for "being of an entity." So "to ask for the Being of something is to inquire into the nature or meaning of that phenomenon" (p. 175).

Phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry looks at the world through lived experience. Colaizzi (1978) explains that "if only observable, duplicable and measurable definitions have psychological validity, then a crucial dimension of the content of human psychological existence, namely, experience, is eliminated from the study of human psychology—and this is done in the name of objectivity ... to be objective means to eliminate and deny what is really there" (p. 51). Studies focussed on "objectivity" do not intend to deny what is really there, but by their design, they eliminate parts of what is really there. It is important to examine distance learning through the lived experiences of distance learners by using a methodology such as phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry that does not eliminate any parts.

By using "a respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 52) and by using an intersubjective approach, which uses discourse to examine lifeworld, the process is a collaborative method of determining meaning within the phenomenon. Not only is the method suited to a total systems approach to discovering information, its wholistic qualities allow us to view life from a truly contextual, situational and real perspective. The descriptive narrative, followed by a critical and reflective process that is accomplished through consultative review, brings to the study a sense of validity about the knowledge gained.

In addition, there is the aspect of dignity and respect for the learners themselves by allowing them to define the meaning of their experience. As a graduate student, this collaborative method allows me to take full advantage of a multi-faceted learning situation. I work in many roles as I move through the process. I am student (a student at the university, but also a student to my co-researchers who inform and share with me their knowledge

through their experience with distance learning). I am a teacher and a facilitator as I instruct and guide the co-researchers through the process. As a conversationalist (interviewing), I depend on my past and newly developed skills to promote the exchange of knowledge. I work with the interpretive elements of the research. I am challenged by the authorship aspect of the study, and I am attracted to the personal direction that the inquiry offers. As part of the collaborative aspect and the participatory aspects of a phenomenological approach (including the relationship between the reader and the narratives), the writing style used is an informal one. The first person is used to encourage and invite the reader to relate and to become involved on a personal level with the text.

Phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry gives me the perfect balance between using my existing skills and developing new ones. In addition, a phenomenological hermeneutic study is a new method of examining distance learning, and gives an opportunity for distance learning to be studied from a total systems point of view. As a researcher, I feel that "*understanding* the investigated phenomenon qualifies exquisitely as a criterion for research knowledge, specifically, an understanding that does not set out explicitly and exclusively to master, control, or dominate it – though never disqualifying (the) results should they turn out to have technological relevance" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 56).

Summary

Distance learning is an individualized learning activity and an intercommunicative process that involves technologically mediated transactions of interactive learning. We live in a world of constant change and the historical development of distance learning situates it

within the lifelong learning world. Distance learning supports lifelong learning by removing barriers to learning opportunities.

Lifelong learning is now recognized as a necessary reality in our present world and encompasses all three aspects of personal, social and professional development. People seek diversified methods and areas of learning in order to pursue their developmental needs. We have to constructively respond to this need. Distance learning plays a significant and valuable role in responsibly contributing to people's lifelong learning needs by providing a structure and a method that assists lifelong learning.

Within the distance learning world is the distance learner, the person who uses distance learning as a tool to enable her or him to pursue the quest for knowledge and personal growth. We seek to understand the distance learner's experiences in order to understand distance learning and the role that it plays in a person's life. People who provide and sustain the learning system can learn more about the essential qualities that make learning effective by furthering our understanding of the lived experiences of distance learners. The learners themselves tell how to make distance learning and lifelong learning better.

What we have then is a symbiotic relationship. Distance learning expands the opportunities to learn and thereby fosters personal development.

In order to use distance learners' lived experiences to discover the essential elements of the distance learning lifeworld, we use a wholistic approach that studies a phenomenon within and in relation to its total context. Phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry allows us to view the distance learning experience from a truly contextual, situational and real perspective.

CHAPTER THREE

PHENOMENOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC RESEARCH - METHODOLOGY

"There are five key variables that are absolutely critical in evaluation use. They are, in order of importance: people, people, people, people, and people. – Halcolm" (as cited in Patton, 1997, p. 39).

Introduction

How does one go about the task of researching a question that asks for the *meaning* of something? As Evans (1989) asked in his dissertation: can we move "beyond individual prejudices or mere personal preference to something more stable and less fluid?" (p. 31). The answer is "yes", and we can do so by using the phenomenological hermeneutic method. Further, explicating the meaning of being a distance learner is a fundamental question (from the Latin *fundamentum*, or foundation, basis, ground, beginning) that needs to be asked if we fully intend to understand, and to improve the theory and the practice of the distance learning system. The question of what it means to be a distance learner is a practical question; it refers to the lifeworld. In other words, its meaning has significance to a specified context, not to the abstract or the "representational world of theory" (Evans, 1989, p. 32). The domain of meaning "resides in the embodied world of the here-and-now, the sentient, experienced and experienceable world of concrete acts and real events—the world of the pre-reflexive, the pre-theoretic (Marleau-Ponty, 1962)" (as cited in Evans, 1989, p. 32). We examine the wonder of the ordinary world, the importance of the everyday world. I must add

that although the question begins with a recollection that describes the event as it was lived, without the reflective element, the description or narrative is then examined in detail with the intent to be reflective and interpretive.

"Zaner tells us that 'the sense of the phenomenological method is very much like that of an explorer when he turns to the task of where he has been and how he got there…' Provided the course is carefully laid out, *the way is open for others to extend the exploration or intensify the level of investigation at any juncture which relates to their particular concerns.*" (as cited in Collins, 1984, p. 180)

This chapter serves to explain important phenomenological concepts which have direct relevance to research methodology, and explains how the lived experience of being a distance learner will be investigated. Keeping in mind that the phenomenological orientation insists upon the essential interconnectiveness of objects and events which occur in the world of human action, the plan connects directly with the concepts.

Analogous to the discovery method (one of several learning theories cited in Stephens, (1989, p. 203), the exact nature of what will be learned is unknown at the beginning of a phenomenological study because part of the process entails questions and issues. Husserl (as cited in Collins, 1984) reminds us that "(in) point of fact, the beginning is here the most difficult thing of all... the new field does not lie spread before our gaze crowded with given products, so that we simply grasp them…" (p. 180). The experiences and the information that is shared by our distance learners at the beginning of the process are yet to be discovered through the exploration process detailed in this chapter.

Methodological Overview

"Human science aims at explicating the meaning of human phenomena ... and at understanding the lived structures of meanings (such as in phenomenological studies of the lifeworld)" (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). From a phenomenological point of view, research questions and describes our lived experiences. As van Manen (1990) explains, "theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world" (p. 5), which makes research a caring act. We want to know more about that which is an essential part of our being.

"Phenomenological knowledge is empirical, based on experience, but it is not inductively empirically derived" (van Manen, 1990, p. 22), meaning that phenomenology does not generalize. Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to avoid the fragmentation of lives and focusses on the uniqueness of human experience. In this sense, for the purpose of this study, hermeneutic phenomenology is used to try to understand the phenomenon of the experience of learning and relating with others at a distance from a wholistic perspective. Phenomenology is a human science approach that studies the lifeworld, and "aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" by asking, "What is this or that kind of experience like?" (p. 9). "Phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective. Reflection on lived experience is always recollective" (p. 10).

The "phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience-is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience" (p. 27).

Drawing from Colaizzi (1978) and van Manen (1990), I have blended together the following main elements and incorporated them for my approach in this study. Hence this hermeneutic phenomenological research involves:

1. A serious interest and commitment to a phenomenon, some experience that human beings live through.

2. Investigating an experience as it is lived, not as it is conceptualized. (This is a key point and is revisited often, such as in the next paragraph, in the subtopics of this chapter entitled presuppositions, protocol writing and conversations.)

3. Extracting phrases or sentences that directly pertain to the investigated phenomenon (Colaizzi calls these "significant statements" [1978, p. 59]).

4. Formulating meanings from the significant statements (The phenomenological researcher uses creative insight to move from what is said to what is meant without severing the connection from the original description. "Contextual and horizontal meanings are given *with* the protocol but are not *in* it; so the researcher must go beyond what is given in the original data and at the same time, stay with it" [Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59]. This is an important step in the pursuit of understanding the phenomenon.)

5. Organizing "the aggregate formulated meanings into clusters of themes" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59).

6. Reflecting on the themes that characterize the phenomenon and validating them by referring back to the original description (trying to understand the meanings within the narrative).

7. Re-examining any themes that are not validated.

8. Describing the phenomenon in a textual format.

9. Maintaining a strong orientation to the phenomenon.

10. Having the co-researcher validate the interpretations and contribute to the interpretive process.

11. Using multiple activities to further explicate the meaning of the phenomena (These activities will be elaborated later in this paper.).

12. Balancing the research context by considering the whole system. (van Manen, 1990, pp. 30-31, 53; Colaizzi, 1978, pp. 59-61).

Lived experience is subjective. Dilthey (as cited in van Manen, 1990) writes, "Only in thought does it become objective" (p. 35). The research is designed to "transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence" (p. 36), and thereby enriches the phenomenon by discovering its meaning. The hermeneutic element is the interpretive study that aims to understand and determine the meaning embodied in the lived experience. We want to discover the nature of distance learning by examining both the ontic (real and concrete attributes) and the ontological qualities. The task of phenomenological research and writing is to "construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 41). We begin this process with descriptive first-hand accounts. These narratives are the sources of knowledge. Narratives are neither abstractions from life, nor imitations of life. They do not so much reflect life as much as they are life. This is their importance to us as educators. Unlike most positivistically inspired research that tends to fragment life, narratives as data have the effect of integrating part and whole, the contingent and the universal, the descriptive and the normative (van Manen, 1989)" (as cited in Evans, 1989, pp. 34-35). The value of narratives is that they engage us; they ask us to participate by seeking a response from us. When we read narratives as experiential material, we ask ourselves:

1. How does this narrative relate to me personally?
2. What would I do or how would I feel in this situation?

Patočka () refers to phenomenological description as "lived experiential real (reell) processes" that are "eidetic cognitions" (p. 65). Husserl (as cited in Dodd, 1996) believes that with fact, "there stands the *necessity* of *eidos* (*Wesen* or "essence"). *Eidos (Wesen* or "essence") is originally nothing but the necessary *"whatness"* contained in the individual, factual being" (p. 73). Narratives are not sample case studies; they are the catalyst to our judgements, our reflection, our ongoing thinking about real situations. As you read the narratives in this study, you will use them as they relate to you - as an educator, an administrator, a student, a non-experienced or an experienced distance learner, a theoretician, a researcher, or someone involved with the support system of a learning organization. These narratives are meant to be concrete situations of learners' lives that are shared so that through a reflection process, we can gain insight and understanding of a learning system. The question is the absolute substance of this study, and because we prioritize the question, we use the way of hermeneutics to discover meaning.

What is the way of hermeneutics? How will we discover meaning? These questions also raise the issue of validity. In what sense do we use the term *validity* in this study?

First, we must realize our limitations. I am not privy to all the cultural, historical, social, unconscious or motivating elements that are part of the narratives told to me. Readers can construe various meanings from a text even when they know they should discipline this impulse. Taking into account these limitations, the following subtopics in this chapter help to clarify the meaning of validity in a phenomenological hermeneutic study.

The last point to be touched upon in this overview, before examining the methodological process in detail, deals with the issue of directionality. "For behaviorism, consciousness is a product of external events. We are conscious in the sense of being under stimulus control.

Purpose or intention is merely a bodily reaction to reinforcement received from the environment" (Collins, 1984, p. 186). On the other hand, phenomenology of adult learning focusses "its investigations on both the constitution of the intentional object and the intentional act.... *Intentionality, then, refers to the purposive experiencing of objects and events in which individuals bestow meaning on their activities*" (p. 186). Consequently, phenomenology is both inner and outer-directed rather than only outer-directed.

Role of the Researcher:

I ask myself: why I am involved with this phenomenon? There are three responses to this question:

1. Personal interest and curiosity.
2. Commitment to the phenomenon of being a distance learner.
3. Desire to contribute to the total systems approach within the distance learning system by enriching our knowledge about the distance learner, knowledge that furthers our understanding of being a distance learner and of distance learning.

How does a part of my personality affect the decision to investigate this particular phenomenon? I have the belief that qualitative methodology can enrich distance learning research. I am aware of my inclination and my predisposition to use an investigative method with a wholistic nature. I am strongly drawn to further understand the meaning of being a distance learner. Because of the chosen phenomenon, I prefer to use a collaborative research method that allows the co-researchers the opportunity to share in the hermeneutic quality of the study and to develop a feeling of ownership toward the investigation.

I recognize any preconceived hypotheses, attitudes, and hunches that I might have. Recognizing my presuppositions, I then abandon any desire to predict and control behaviour. Further, I relinquish any technological mentality, which tends to be deterministic. I need to let go of any unnecessary operational definitions, and to trust that I will contact the phenomenon as people experience it. It is not my duty to come to conclusions or to seek power, but rather, to arrive at informed judgements.

It is my responsibility to establish the appropriate relationship with the participants of the study, to follow through with the collection strategies, the interpretive process, and to complete the descriptive writing. My aim is to identify and understand the phenomenon. My role as a phenomenologist leads me to view the phenomenon wholistically and my intention is to shed light on the totality (Colaizzi, 1978, pp. 55-70).

I plan to attempt an unprejudiced description of lived experience of the distance learner without considering causal factors. We will seek the essence of the distance learners' experiences (Kvale, 1996, pp. 52-55).

Selection of Co-researchers

While living first-hand the experience of distance learning, I have met many people committed to not only their personal learning process, but to the positive development of learning per se. In May, 1998, Athabasca University organized the Distance Education Technologies Workshop, which preceded the Canadian Association for Distance Education Conference, both of which were located in Banff, Alberta. I participated in both of these events. Several people heard that I was pursuing thesis work using the phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry method. Two distance learners (a man and a woman) approached me

and volunteered to help with my studies. Through a different distance learning experience, another female distance learner agreed to help me with my thesis work. All three are suitable candidates because they are geographically located within a three to twelve hour drive from my home. I can travel to their home or work environments for the personal interviews. Further, being distance learners, they are very acquainted with meaningful communication using technological media. They are sincere, genuine, conscientious people who appreciate thesis work, and who value personal integrity. One woman has completed an undergraduate degree through distance learning, a master's degree on campus, and is presently working on her second master's through the distance education format. The man is involved with his first post-graduate work and his second distance education experience. The other woman finished her undergraduate degree using a distance learning format and has completed her master's degree using distance learning tools. In addition, these distance learners have experience and education, both of which have prepared them for the writing and reflective skills that make them able to produce the phenomenological descriptions required of them for this thesis.

It is relevant to note that before we worked together on the thesis, a trusting relationship had begun without discussion about the details of the thesis. In other words, all co-researchers had an opportunity to decide that they could trust me as a person of integrity, but our relationships are fresh, and not burdened by any history that would distract from the focus of the study.

There is other "data" used, such as anecdotal material that I collect as the thesis progresses. Individuals supplying the information for this content are asked permission for their input to be part of the phenomenological collection.

Presuppositions

To understand the meaning of a phenomenon, there needs to be a "*readiness to suspend taken-for-granted beliefs (attitudes) in favor of a critical stance towards everyday experiences*"... Far from denying the existence of the "real" world, this stance entails a rigorous assessment of what is typically accepted as reality in our day-to-day lives" (Collins, 1984, p. 181). Consequently, as a researcher, I need to deliberately make an effort to temporarily set aside or explain presuppositions of adult learning situations. Presuppositions can become problematic if they are not bracketed (Collins, 1984, p. 183; van Manen, 1990, p. 47; Valle and King, 1978, p. 12). Bracketing "entails a deliberate, though temporary, suspension of the unquestioning acceptance of those everyday, habitual, interpretations and characteristics associated with the problem at hand" (Collins, 1984, p. 183). We must guard against imposing pre-understandings, assumptions, existing knowledge, preconceived and/or inappropriate views upon our phenomenon under study. The "programmatic intent is to bring about a greater understanding of the structures of our lifeworld" (p. 184). Existing scientific knowledge as well as everyday knowledge should not predispose us to interpret the nature of our phenomenon prematurely (van Manen, 1990, p. 46-47).

How do we best bracket any presuppositions? According to van Manen (1990), this suspension of theories requires us to make these biases and assumptions explicit, coming to terms with our beliefs, not forgetting them, but deliberately holding our presuppositions at bay (p. 47). Rothe (1985) includes in his definition of descriptive phenomenology the need to explore, to analyze, and to describe a phenomenon, "as free as possible from unexamined presuppositions" (p. 15). The key word is unexamined. It is my responsibility as researcher

to minimize presuppositions. According to van Manen (1990), if presuppositions are suspended, then the lived-experience of the phenomenon is all that remains (p. 53). In phenomenological hermeneutic research, we aim to see phenomena freshly, and admittedly, prior learning or experience can hamper our vision and understanding of the phenomena. We attempt, therefore, to minimize its impact on our research. Louise is the first co-researcher that I worked with, and I purposely addressed this issue with her before I began any work with the other co-researchers. At the end of her chapter, I have included a summarized transcript of our discussion that includes our dialogue about this topic, and appendix B is the full transcript of the same dialogue.

Collection Strategies

The strategy used to attain a reflective grasp of the phenomenological structure of a lived experience is a difficult task. "The insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 77). Collins (1984) explains that reflection "incorporates the object reflected upon (noema) as well as the reflecting itself (noesis)" (p. 187). The phenomenological method involves not only reflection using the process of recollection and retention, which ties immediate experiences with those of the past, but this inquiry method also involves anticipative reflection, where meaning is imparted to foreseeable outcomes.

Phenomenological reflection and explication means that the researcher must "effect a more direct contact with the experience as lived" (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) by examining the meaning of the phenomenon from a multi-dimensional approach and by using the thematic

process as part of the interpretation. The thematic process elucidates the meaning of the experience because it helps to clarify and explain the phenomenon.

"Phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experience. When we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). In this study, the researcher will collect descriptions through protocol writing and the conversational (interview) method, and look for emerging themes *after* the material is gathered. I use my personal distance learning experience as an introduction into the collection of narratives and developing themes. Themes are also developed from other sources that are listed in this chapter under the subtopic "summary of the collection process."

Themes

Before summarizing the collection process, I would like to divert and further clarify the process of developing themes.

Every entity that we encounter is being met within a context, whether of our activity or in relationship with something else (Dodd, 1996, p. xiv). It is within this context that themes emerge. Our intent is to discover that which makes our phenomenon "the kind of quality it is" (p. 42). We are looking for qualities that localize the intending of the universal. A theme is not a "frequency count or coding of selected terms" (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) from the phenomenological materials. Themes are "a means to get at the notion we are addressing" (p. 79). They are "the experiential structures that make up the experience" (p. 79).

How do we more specifically identify themes? Miller and Hodge attempt to provide some direction for this identification process. Miller and Hodge (1998) consider

"hermeneutic [as] the alternative name to" phenomenological research (p. 1). In this study, however, phenomenology and hermeneutic are two separate parts of a whole. The whole is phenomenological hermeneutic research, which encompasses phenomenology (description) and hermeneutics (interpretation). In this thesis the phenomenological element and the hermeneutic element are two functions. Miller and Hodge propose the need for methodological guidelines that add control and structure to the phenomenological hermeneutic process (p. 3). The strength, however, of the method used in this phenomenological hermeneutic research is its openness to discovery that includes a complete contextual, experiential, situational experience. If we use methodological guidelines to "identify a 'path' and remain on it" (p. 3), then we run the risk of narrowing our access to knowledge and closing ourselves from discovering possible unanticipated and unexpected information. Miller and Hodge indicate a need for "projectability" and "generality" (p. 5). They ask whether we need a "technical requirement that a selected theme cover a certain percentage of cases" (p. 5), such as, seventy to one hundred percent. It is my contention that phenomenological hermeneutic research is aiming for plausibility, not generalization. We are seeking plausible understandings of phenomena through our study of the meanings of these phenomena. I do agree that the "determination of a 'theme' is both a socially constructed category needing explanation as well as a presumed 'real' description of lived experience" (p. 5). Consequently, this study addresses this issue by including a literature review, expanded readings, hermeneutic readings, consultative reviews with both thesis advisors and co-researchers, and writings that discuss and explain the interpretations. These tools are used together as a means to justify what counts as a theme. Miller and Hodge (1998) lay out some questions that help justify what can be counted as a theme. These questions are focussed on

how one justifies a theme through the process of logic and reason (p. 7), which, in this study, is part of the consultative review.

Van Manen's suggestions regarding the relationship between theme and the phenomenon are helpful. Some of his main points are that a theme:

1. Is the focus, meaning, and point of the experience.
2. Is a simplification.
3. Captures the phenomenon.
4. Is the sense we are able to make of something.
5. Is the process of insightful invention, discovery, and disclosure.
6. Is the tool for getting at the meaning of the experience.
7. Touches the core of the notion we are trying to understand (1990, pp. 87-93).

The concept of themes can be further demonstrated using van Manen's metaphors:

1. "Like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are

spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes..."

2. "Are stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through..."
3. Are the light which help us to "navigate and explore" the universe. (1990, p. 90)

Outlined in van Manen's book (1990) are three approaches for uncovering thematic aspects of a phenomenon: the wholistic or sententious approach, the highlighting or selective approach, and the line-by-line or detailed approach (pp. 92-95). All three will be useful as long as I explicate themes, and yet remain true to the universal quality of the phenomenon. For the protocols, I concentrate on the detailed approach, but call it expanded (explained later in this chapter). With the conversations, I focus on the selective method, but call it expanded

(explained later in this chapter). For all narratives, a wholistic view is useful to summarize the themes, and you will see this wholistic view in the hermeneutic readings. The co-researchers will play an important part in validating and clarifying the themes. Later in this chapter and in chapter four, I describe what protocol writing is, and explain why I choose to use the word expanded.

Summary of the Collection Process:

For any strategy that has not been explained already, an elaboration follows in the later topics of this chapter.

The following *strategies* are used:

1. "Explicating assumptions and pre-understandings" (van Manen, 1990, p. 46, and discussed above under "presuppositions" in this chapter).
2. Personal experience as a starting point (presented later in this chapter).
3. "Tracing etymological resources" (presented later in this chapter).
4. Protocol process (presented later in this chapter).
5. Conversations/Interviews to obtain experiential descriptions (presented later in this chapter) and to ask:

What is it about distance learning which makes distance learning different from other educational pursuits?

What is it like to have a distance learning experience?

What is it about distance learning that impacts the learner's life?

What is the meaning of being a distance learner?

6. Documents, such as journals, diaries, logs (presented later in this chapter).

Biographies of Co-researchers

Past and present experiences are related. "Life does not create only itself, in the sense of its present phases, but also the means for future purposes and the purposes of the past means" (Dodd, 1996, p. 165). The historical nature of this continuous process of applying meaning upon itself requires that we have some biographical knowledge of the co-researchers. An individual's stock of knowledge is formed as new elements of knowledge (cognitions) and their implications are integrated into the layers of previously acquired knowledge. Previously acquired knowledge itself influences the manner in which new knowledge is integrated" (Collins, 1984, p. 181; Dodd, 1996, p. 116). (A copy of the request for biographical data is available in appendix A.)

Personal Experience

As van Manen points out, my own experience may be the possible experience of others, just as the experiences of others are possible experiences of oneself. Therefore, in experiential terms, I describe my lived experience as a distance learner, excluding any reference to causal explanations (1990, pp. 54-58). I have chosen to use personal narratives in order to introduce this study. You have already seen how I incorporated my anecdotes in chapter one, where I described a couple of my personal experiences as a distance learner. I did this for two reasons:

1. To experience protocol writing myself in order to live firsthand the experience of writing protocols, and thereby, to help me understand my co-researchers' experiences of writing protocols.

2. To introduce the topic by:

   - Immediately providing an introductory glimpse into phenomenological hermeneutic work.
   - Demonstrating how I became interested and even more curious about the topic.
   - Sharing the need to explore distance learning through phenomenological hermeneutic study.

By writing about my experiences, van Manen's words struck true with me: "to be aware of the structure of one's own experience of a phenomenon may provide the researcher with clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon and thus to all the other stages of phenomenological research" (1990, p. 57). What we are all sharing in this study are possible human experiences, and by adding my own narratives I hopefully emphasize the feeling that "phenomenological descriptions have a universal (intersubjective) character" (p. 58).

Definitions and Etymological Resources (what words mean)

"Language is an instrument of communication. The language which can with the greatest ease make the finest … meaning is best" (Lewis, 1990, p. 6). Accepting Lewis' opinion, there is some language used within the context of this paper that deserves some definitional elaboration. Throughout the paper, there is definitional elaboration where needed for the purpose of clarification. Keep in mind that no matter what definitional status I may give to a word or phrase, the co-researchers may define some terms themselves. (For instance, both Louise and Meg share aspects of their definition of classroom education as they unfold their conversational narrative. I did not define classroom education for them and there is no intent to agree or disagree with their definitions). These definitions by the co-

researchers need to be understood in order for us to understand the meaning of their narratives. On the other hand, there may be occasion where the understanding of a word may be the catalyst for discussion during the hermeneutic or writing phases of the thesis.

Etymology deals with the origin, formation, and development of words. Etymology is from the earlier form of the Old French, *ethimologie*, which derives from the Latin *etymologia*, from the Greek, *etumologia,* from *etumologos* (student of etymology), from *etumon*, meaning literal sense of the word, original form, primary or basic word. Words have sometimes "become lame, limp, mute, emptied, and forgetful of their past power" (van Manen, 1990, p. 58). By paying attention to the etymology of words in this study, I hope to explain why I choose some words rather than others. Further, I hope to put us in touch with the original and the current meanings of words with the intent that this brings life and meaning to the narratives.

As an example, I'll explain why I choose to use the word narrative, instead of story. Although story means an historical relation or anecdote, or facts or experiences worthy of narration, story can also mean an account of imaginary events. If we go back to its Latin roots, then we find that story can also be associated with *narratio*, *fabula,* and even, *mendacium. Mendacium* means lie. Van Manen reminds us that the "search of etymological sources can be an important (but often neglected) aspect of phenomenological 'data gathering'" (1990, p. 61), and adds that idiomatic phrases can be "born out of lived experience" (p. 60). For instance, we say when insinuating somebody is fibbing or exaggerating an event, "Oh, he's just telling a story!" *Fabula* also has mixed meanings, including such interpretations as myth and small talk. If you pursue its translations into its colloquial past, then we have the expressions, *fabulae* (baloney!), and *lupus in fabula* (speak

of the devil). The stories in this study are not lies, fabrications of the imagination, myths, or small talk. They are narratives, *narratio,* an account of connected events, from *narrare* (to tell, to describe, recount, relate), from *gnarus* (knowing), and in its earliest use, Anglo-Latin, *narrare*, *narratio,* and *narrator* referred to the statement of a claim.

The purpose of etymology is to trace the origin and historical development of words. Sometimes, by determining a word's basic elements, by discovering its earliest known use, by searching for changes in form and meaning, by tracing its transmission from one language to another, by identifying its cognates in other languages, and by reconstructing its ancestral form where possible, we can get in touch with original meanings that "still had living ties to the lived experiences from which they originally sprang" (van Manen, 1990, p. 59).

Related to this technique, but not the same, is the search for idiomatic expressions, ones that are usually "born out of lived experience" (p. 60).

Throughout the paper you will find linguistic associations that offer interpretive significance for the phenomenological descriptions. I have tried to avoid blindly collecting linguistic items, but have attempted to expose verbal interpretations in a reflective manner in order to increase the significance of the phenomenological hermeneutic work.

Protocol Writing

The term "protocol" derives from the Greek, *protokollon*, from *protos* (first) and *kolla* (glue), which referred to the first leaf of a volume, originally glued to the case and containing an account of the contents. The protocol is the first leaf of a co-researcher's narrative in this study. It is the original draft from which I begin the phenomenological hermeneutic study of

the co-researcher's experience as a distance learner. In phenomenological hermeneutic work protocol writing is original text that is used by the researcher as data. Whereas in some studies, protocol writing is a handicap (Maeda—Fujita, 1990), in this thesis, it is advantageous. I have decided to use protocol writing as part of this study because the co-researchers are able to handle the linguistic demands of the writing process, and they can thereby enrich the research with their skills. Through an anecdote about an event that was experienced as a distance learner, the narrator allows us to become more experienced ourselves about the phenomenon by enriching the full significance of the phenomenon. By using an example or relating an incident, the narrator brings us closer to understanding the nature of distance learning as an essentially human experience. When co-researchers choose a specific event or adventure to describe, they tend to pick an example that stands out vividly in their memories. They recollect this happening as it was the first time, not as an event that they reflect upon.

Co-researchers are asked to write a direct account of a personal experience as they lived through it. They are to avoid causal generalizations, but are to describe the experience revealing their feelings, their mood, their emotions, and to focus on the description of a specific event or happening. They must try to remember the experience as it was the "first" time. The description focusses on how the body feels, how things smell or sound, what they hear or feel. Writing tends to influence people into a reflective mode that distracts from pure phenomenological description. Therefore, I needed to be wary of and exclude explanations and interpretations from the pre-reflective writings. The preliminary contact with co-researchers and the ongoing procedural steps of the protocol process are much like those of the interview process, and are elaborated in the next two subtopics.

Interview Process

When a person relates a meaningful experience to me through conversational interviewing, then I have gathered lived-experience material (van Manen, 1990, p. 53). Other people's experiences help me to understand the deeper significance of a phenomenon. "We gather other people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves" (p. 62). During the initial conversations, I was not primarily seeking the co-researchers' perspectives of the phenomenon, but rather I was asking them what the nature of being a distance learner is as an essentially human experience. Their response to the phenomenological question should shed light on

1. What it is like to learn at a distance.
2. What it means to be a distance learner.

Conversations

"Interviews are conversations where the outcome is a co-production of the interviewer and the subject" (Kvale, 1996, pp. xvii). "The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world.... The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge" (Kvale, 1996, pp. 1-2) that is "characterized by positive feelings of a common intellectual curiosity and a reciprocal respect" (p. 36). I would like to qualify Kvale's statements. In this study, those people who generously share their narratives are not considered subjects. They are considered co-researchers. Besides the importance that

their descriptions give to the study, the co-researchers also have a vital role to play in the interpretation of the narratives, and in reviewing my interpretations in order to validate my work.

Kvale (1996) expounds on the aspects that identify qualitative research interviews. I have selectively chosen some of these aspects that apply to this study (pp. 29-36):

1. Lifeworld (The topic is the everyday world of the co-researcher and his or her relation to it.)

2. Meaning (Although more difficult to interview on a meaning level, both facts and meaning are important data. I needed to register what was said or written as well as how it is said or written. What is being said "between the lines" becomes important information. While we talk, I have to send back messages I receive in hopes of attaining "confirmation or disconfirmation" [p. 32] of what I "heard.")

3. Qualitative (I work with words, not with numbers. "Precision in description and stringency in meaning interpretation correspond in qualitative interviews to exactness in quantitative measurements" [p. 32].)

4. Descriptive (Co-researchers describe what they experience and feel. I aimed for uninterpreted descriptions.)

5. Deliberate naïveté (I am curious, being sensitive to what is said, and not said. I remained critical of my presuppositions. I kept myself open to new and unexpected phenomena.)

6. Focussed (Although I presented the topic [the meaning of being a distance learner], the conversation is not structured, and I tried not lead the co-researchers to certain opinions or feelings about what it means for them to be or to have been a distance learner.)

7. Interpersonal situation (Knowledge is obtained from interpersonal interaction.)

8. Positive experience (A phenomenological hermeneutic conversation can be an enriching experience for all participants, including the reader.)

In this study the interview is called conversation. In chapter four, the introduction explains why I have made this choice.

The conversations were done in two stages. The first face-to-face conversation(s) gathered lived-experience material (narratives, anecdotes, recollections - that is, descriptions and narrative experiential material that exclude causal or interpretive elements). In the following conversation/s, the co-researchers and I dialogued as partners reflecting on a collaborative basis about the meaning of the experience. The later dialogue(s) are hermeneutic in nature and are more appropriately discussed in the interpretation section of this chapter.

The conversation procedure was as follows:

1. Contact with potential co-researchers in order to confirm their commitment to the research.

2. Co-researchers sign the "letter of understanding and consent for participation" in the study.

3. Preliminary discussion of procedure with co-researchers by e-mail and phone:

- Explanation about the methodology (phenomenological hermeneutics).
- Clarification of the methods (protocol writing, conversation, documentation, interpretive process, validation and consultative review process).

  Co-researchers may initially feel that there is nothing to be gained by describing the ordinary and everyday experience until a clarification of the methods and the

research activity reveals the significance of discovering the genuine meaning of these experiences (Dodd, 1996, p. 137). Together, the researchers learn the value of "evocative comprehension" (van Manen, 1990, p. 50).

4. Biographies of co-researchers.

5. Written descriptions (protocol writing) by co-researchers using e-mail attachments.

- Co-researchers were asked to recall something which they experienced that made an impression on them, or which affected or influenced them.
- Co-researchers were able to contact the researcher by phone or e-mail for any continuing clarifications necessary to accomplish the task.

6. Protocol analysis by principal researcher (extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing clusters of themes, and validation with original protocols) (van Manen, 1990, pp. 64-65; Colaizzi, 1978, pp. 59-63; discussed more fully in the interpretation section of this chapter).

7. First face-to-face conversation(s) with co-researchers, using "imaginative listening" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 67). This listening, by being present to the co-researchers in every imaginable way, is a means of gathering experiential narrative material.

8. The above conversations were followed by the interpretive process (extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing clusters of themes, and validation with original transcriptions).

9. Following were the dialogue(s) with co-researchers, using a hermeneutic approach to develop a collaborative attempt to further discover the meaning of the phenomenon.

10. Reflection (Collins, p. 187).

11. Researcher's description (textual writing).

12. Follow-up consultative review with co-researchers. Validation with original conversation/s was followed up with further consultative review with co-researchers by phone and e-mail.

13. Final writing.

Questions

Positivistic and categorical abstractions are avoided. Rather, questions of knowledge are referred to the "lifeworld where knowledge speaks through our lived experiences" (van Manen, 1990, p. 46).

Following are examples of questions that I have designed for the purpose of preparing my thinking about the purpose of our talks. The questions are not used as a tool to structure the exchanges. Phenomenological "interviews" are truly conversational in nature. Phenomenological "interviewing" does not intend to corroborate a preconceived hypothesis or opinion. The writing titled "Leading to the narratives" that introduces chapter 4 explains the conversational method.

How do we explore "what is the nature of the lived experience of the distance learner?" What is distance learning? What does it mean to be a distance learner? What is it about being a distance learner that makes it possible for it to be what it is in its essence (is-ness)? What is it about being a distance learner that makes distance learning different from other educational pursuits? (van Manen, 1990, p. 42, 45).

How did the idea of distance learning first arise?

How did you decide to use distance learning as your chosen format to pursue more education?

Did you talk to anyone about distance learning?

Did you have assumptions about distance learning?

Did any of these assumptions change as you experienced distance learning?

What was it like to discover yourself as a student again?

What was it like to tell others about your learning experience?

Do you look at learning differently because of your experience? In what way?

Can you give an example?

Do you look at distance learning differently because of your experience? In what way? Can you give an example? (van Manen, 1990, pp. 67-68).

What is your distance learning lived space, your felt space, the space in which you find yourself when you are experiencing distance learning? Where you are affects the way you feel. Lived space "is a category for inquiring into the ways we experience the affairs of our day to day existence" (van Manen, 1990, p. 103). Where do you experience your distance learning? Where are you bodily when you are a distance learner? How are you physically present to others?

How would you describe your lived time (subjective time, as opposed to clock time or objective time) as a distance learner? How has distance learning affected your concept of time (temporal dimensions)?

What is your lived relation with others as you experience distance learning? What social, communal relationships affect your sense of purpose within the context of distance learning? (van Manen, 1990, pp. 101-105; Valle and King, 1978, pp. 84-85)

Documents

Once a working relationship was established with the participants in the study, the availability of diaries, journals, and logs was investigated. Such documents did reveal information about the learning experiences that were pertinent to the study (van Manen, 1990, p. 73). I refer to this data as documentation.

Interpretation

I will reach meanings about the experiences through the interpretive process. Hermeneutics involves looking for the emergence of meaning, and using each experience described to help understand the phenomenon being studied. We use the descriptions (pre-reflective narratives of experiences) as data. We then reflect upon the descriptions in order to further our understanding of the meaning embedded within the descriptions. The reflective process leads to interpretations that help us to understand the phenomenon. The meaning, the essence of the phenomenon is discovered through this process of interpreting and understanding.

The phenomenological hermeneutic "method consists of the ability ... of being sensitive ... to the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak ...and to listen to the way the things of the world speak to us" (van Manen, 1990, p. 111). The "primacy of perception ...means that we allow what we see as opposed to forcing our comprehension of the seen to determine our seeing" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 67).

The descriptions that produce content from which to develop significant statements (defined as phrases or sentences that directly pertain to the phenomenon in chapter three, subtopic methodological overview, number three) formulate meanings and organize themes, and will be key elements to the interpretive process, as will the textual writing and the validation/consultative processes.

Protocol analysis is discussed in the protocol writing section (earlier in this chapter) and in the themes section (earlier in this chapter). The key elements are:

1. To avoid causal explanations, generalizations, and interpretations in the protocol writing.
2. To describe the experience from the inside.
3. To focus on specificity of the incidents being described (van Manen, 1990, pp. 64-65).

Colaizzi (1978, pp. 59-65) gives step by step instructions of the phenomenological hermeneutic process. Briefly, the steps involve:

1. Reading the protocols or reviewing the conversations.
2. Extracting significant statements.
3. Formulating meanings.
4. Organizing themes.
5. Validating the themes with the original protocols and transcriptions, and noting discrepancies, if any.
6. Writing a textual description of the phenomenon.
7. Reviewing the interpretations by consulting with the participants in the study.

Writing

"Writing is the method" (van Manen, 1990, p. 126). Phenomenological writing measures our thoughtfulness, and allows us to discover the existential structures of experience. Reflectively "writing about the practice of living makes it possible … to be engaged in a more reflective praxis. By praxis we mean thoughtful action: action full of thought and thought full of action" (p. 128). "Praxis" means practice, from the Greek *praxis* (which means: doing, action). According to van Manen, reflective praxis means that our phenomenological text is full of thought, and that our thought is action-oriented. The practice of writing can help the reader to understand everyday life experience by asking the reader to experience an event through a reflective activity (pp. 128-129). A phenomenological text makes us aware of our own being by playing "the inner against the outer, the subjective self against the objective self, the ideal against the real" (p. 129). Writing helps to reveal the hidden or the core elements of the phenomenon by helping the reader "'see' something in a manner that enriches our understanding of the everyday life experience" (van Manen, 1998, p. 1). Phenomenological written accounts can theorize by producing significant relationships.

Phenomenological hermeneutic writing demonstrates a methodology that does not travel from "method to meaning but from meaning to method" (van Manen, 1998, p. 2). The phenomenologist attempts to place the phenomenon "concretely [emphasis added] in the lifeworld so that the reader may experientially recognize it" (p. 4), and as a consequence, the author gives the reader the experience of "lived throughness" (p. 4). Evocation, Linschoten (as cited in van Manen, 1998) says, is the way to create the experience of nearness or presence, and of thoughtful reflection (pp. 7-8). In addition, listening to tone is essential in

phenomenological hermeneutic writing. "Tone means that we must let the text speak to us, so that its deeper meaning has a noncognitive effect on the reader" (p. 10). Through the interpretive process, we are attempting to bring out the inner meaning within the phenomenological text. We read a text or see something, but besides this visual experience, we recognize something deeper through an auditory sense. This tonal meaning that comes from being sensitive to the text beyond its informational value is acquired by focussing on the expressive qualities within and the situational context surrounding the text. How one regards something, however, is not necessarily accurate. In this study, I record the conversations so that I can revisit the meaning that transcends the informational content of the text. As well, I consult with the co-researchers to verify with them my interpretations of both the content and the tonal qualities within the descriptions.

"The researcher is an author who writes from the midst of life experience where meanings resonate and reverberate with reflective being. The researcher-as-author is challenged to construct a phenomenological text that possesses concreteness, evocativeness, intensity, tone, and epiphany" (van Manen, 1998, p. 16).

Predicted Outcomes

"In contrast to the more positivistic and behavioral empirical sciences, human science does not see theory as something that stands before practice in order to inform it. Practice (or life) always comes first and theory comes later as a result of reflection" (van Manen, 1990, p. 15). When we begin phenomenological hermeneutic research we cannot predict the discoveries of the study, which are yet to be interpreted from the collection strategies. As Schleiermacher says, "the integrity of praxis does not depend on theory…theory does not

control praxis" (van Manen, 1990, p. 15). Schleiermacher adds, "but praxis can become more aware of itself by means of theory" (as cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 15). In other words, through critical and anticipative reflection of our lived experience as distance learners, we can use "adult education (to facilitate) a learning society" (Collins, 1984, p. 187-188), not just from an individual perspective, but also from a professional one.

(I also talk about predicted outcomes in the literature review, subtopic Qualitative Human Science Research, and again in chapter three, subtopics Presuppositions and Writing.)

Objectivity

Colaizzi (1978) tells us that "*objectivity is fidelity to phenomena*. It is the refusal to tell the phenomenon what it is, but a respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself" (p. 52). Kvale (1996) writes that objectivity in qualitative research is:

1. "*Freedom from bias*" (p. 64).
2. Characterized with "*dialogical intersubjectivity*' …(which) "refers to agreement through a rational discourse and reciprocal critique among those identifying and interpreting a phenomenon" (p. 65).
3. Letting the phenomenon speak.

Insight and understanding of the distance learning system requires a human science approach that recognizes self and consciousness not as a problem, but that acknowledges subjectivity as a fundamental principle of knowledge. The credibility of this study lies not in purposely choosing a random selection of participants, but in selecting appropriate people who can tell relevant narratives. The fact that they are of different genders and of varied professional and educational backgrounds are assets. The fact that they are from a level of

schooling that allows advanced textual writing can enrich the work. Ultimately, the only necessary component is that they must be distance learners.

Reliability, Validity

"In general terms, reliability refers to the consistency among observers regarding a given set of data; validity refers to the adequacy of data relative to a given set of hypotheses" (Sjoberg and Nett, 1968, p. 298). What does reliability mean within the context of phenomenological hermeneutic study? In this thesis, there is more than one dimension to consider. First, how do I record the conversations in order not to lose valuable information? I took notes, but primarily I relied on getting verbatim quotes by taping the conversations. I tested the equipment to make sure it was reliable, and tested myself to make sure I felt comfortable using my tools. I made sure that I knew how to attain conversations that are audible. Second, are the transcriptions reliable? Assuming the taping is successful, and the quality of the recording provides data with conversations that are audible, then the next step is to decide upon how to transform the conversations from an oral discourse to a written discourse. I chose verbatim quotes. Hence, the conversations are direct quotes from the co-researchers, not narratives that are summarized with words chosen at my discretion. In addition, the co-researchers check the transcriptions for accuracy. After the protocol writing and the conversations are finished, I work on the transcriptions and the interpretations. I then begin a consultative review process with each co-researcher. The co-researcher examines all the text that relates to her or him personally for the purpose of validating the transcriptions, validating the interpretations, making or changing any of the text, and contributing to the interpretive process.

Reliability does not mean consistency among the co-researchers regarding a given set of data. A positivist version aims to generalize the experience of particular individuals to a larger group, and to hope for universal generalization. A humanistic view does not try to ascertain commonalities by finding consistent and recurrent patterns, but rather it knows that every situation is unique, "each phenomenon has its own intrinsic structure and logic" (Kvale, 1996, p. 232). There is a shift from generalization to contextualization and heterogeneity of knowledge. By providing concrete portrayals of distance learners' lives, "as readers we may find continuity between these concrete examples and the particulars of our own lives. ... A vivid experiential description is methodologically valuable because it creates the experience of nearness or presence" (van Manen, 1998, pp. 6-7), which prompts our thoughtful reflection. With phenomenological hermeneutic research, the researcher is an author who focusses on richness, completeness, and fullness, "who writes from the midst of life experience where meanings resonate and reverberate with reflective being" (p. 16).

I have already touched on how the co-researchers have a major role to play in confirming the transcriptions and in reviewing the interpretations. Co-researchers are consultants in the interpretive process. In addition, a community of researchers validates the theoretical interpretations, and I am indebted to my thesis committee whose expertise in the distance learning field is appreciated and valued. The third community of validation is the readers. From the reader's perspective, the "phenomenological nod" (as discussed in chapter one) is your interpretation of the description. By interpretation, I mean that you examine the narrative in order to conceive its significance or explain its meaning. In addition, although you are not asked to accept our (mine and the co-researchers') interpretations, you need to ask yourself whether our interpretations are reasonably documented and logically coherent?

Individual readers decide that for themselves. If we have "soundness" in the thematizing, an adequate design and an appropriate method, a validated transcription, interpretations that are reviewed and accepted, and an honest account of the interpretations, then what more can we do? There remain the co-researchers. Were they trustworthy, and what was the quality of the conversations? In the methodology chapter (under the subtopic, sample selection), you will see that other than being distance learners, I wanted co-researchers with a sense of integrity, with a sincere appreciation for conscientious work and honest interaction. I believe that Louise, Axel, and Meg are such people. I made every effort to facilitate the protocol writing and the conversations without introducing biases, and to continually check all interpretations. Systematic description and reflection of everyday experiences can contribute to a refined understanding of a human world understood as a conversational reality.

Validity does not mean "adequacy of data relative to a given set of hypotheses." Validity means adequacy of data that goes "beyond a correspondence theory of truth" (Kvale, 1996, p. 289) by communicating and acting with life in a privileged way. The strength of phenomenological hermeneutic study is its use of protocol writing and conversations to attain *privileged access* to the understanding that provides a basis for people's actions. (This is discussed earlier in chapter one at the end of subtopic, background.) It is at the root of phenomenological hermeneutic study that we work from meaning to method (van Manen, 1998, pp. 1-18). First, we must understand, and then, we can move to more enlightened theories.

Conclusion

Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to avoid the fragmentation of lives and focusses on the uniqueness of human experience. From a phenomenological point of view, research questions and describes our lived experiences. As van Manen (1990) explains, "theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it…[which makes] research a caring act: we want to know that which is most essential to being" (p. 5). By using the phenomenological hermeneutic approach, we aim for an investigative and collaborative relationship with another person in the manner that Andras Angyal (as cited in Moustakas, 1974) recommends: the understanding of the other person "is not some sort of shrewd 'practical psychology' which has a keen eye for the weakness of people, but a deep perception of the core, of the essential nature of the other person" (p. 77).

A phenomenological hermeneutic study attempts to document what is "really going on," and provides an illuminative evaluation that places interpretation as a basic structure of our experience with life. (Morgan, 1984, p. 253; Miller and Hodge, 1998, p. 2) What is "really going on" in distance learning can be described and interpreted when we study and try to understand distance learning from a wholistic perspective. The "phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience – is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 27).

CHAPTER FOUR

LOUISE

"Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go"

(T. S. Elliot, 1995, as cited in Quest for Quality programs).

Leading Up to the Narratives

In the first chapter, I shared personal narratives. These anecdotal readings lead us into the purpose of this thesis, to further understand the meaning of being a distance learner. Further I mention how these events add to my curiosity about what it means to be a distance learner. In chapter three, I documented how the co-researchers were selected (mainly described under the topics: selection of the co-researchers and objectivity). It is important to repeat, however, that although the co-researchers are of different gender, of different educational and professional backgrounds, and that this diversity does add to the potential of gathering an interesting variety of anecdotal information, no special sampling devices were used. It was only necessary that the co-researchers have experienced distance learning in order to make their narratives relevant, meaningful and valid.

Although it can be said that the distance learner is represented in this research, I did not seek to represent any given population within the distance learning classification. There is no attempt to select any individuals with particular learning styles or with certain interests in specified courses. Nor were they chosen in order to be typical or atypical; they simply "are." What we remember is that we are not attempting to generalize, but rather we are focussing on the specificity of real, experiential experiences. This is not to say that these narratives are

idiosyncratic in nature, however. Readers should identify with the narratives from their own situational perspectives. The learning for us who share in the narratives is derived from our participation as critical readers. We use the anecdotal information to relate to and to develop relevant and related aspects within our lives (perhaps personally, perhaps professionally).

Contact was made with the co-researchers, and their consent to participate in the research was confirmed. Orientation involved detailed explanations about the methodology, and about the purpose of the thesis. We clarified our roles in the process, and discussed scheduling. When the co-researchers were ready, they wrote their protocol writings and sent them to me via e-mail. After working on the expanded and hermeneutic readings of the protocols (which includes some consultation of my interpretations by collaborating with other individuals), the conversational process began. I reminded the co-researchers of the confidentiality aspect, not only for themselves, but also for anyone involved in their narratives. Consequently they were asked to refer to people anonymously. If actual places or names were used accidentally, I edited the data to preserve the confidentiality of all individuals. Pseudonyms are used.

I met with each of the co-researchers alone for our conversations (the number of which depended on what was necessary to extend the talks to the point where the co-researchers felt we had reached a depth of conversation that delved into their meaning of being a distance learner). The format of the conversations was not focussed on data-gathering as one would in a case study or an ethnographic study, but rather we conversed with no preconceived or structured format. As personal preparation for the conversations, I had thought of some questions that focussed on the meaning of being a distance learner. These questions are outlined in chapter three (methodology) and were only designed to prepare my thinking about

what possible areas of discussion relate to the meaning of being a distance learner, not prepared for the purpose of structuring or directing the conversations. The purpose of our conversations was to remain descriptive, and to focus on the meaning of being a distance learner. By purpose, I do not mean that there are preconceived directions or questions related to the topic, but I mean that we aim to stay on the topic of being a distance learner. The questions were not used as a tool to structure the exchanges. Phenomenological "interviews" are truly conversational in nature. It was my role to maintain the momentum of the exchange, and to preserve the legitimacy of the research by keeping the topic meaningful. In other words, the dialogue is an activity that accesses the inner-world of a distance learner's personal experience.

Phenomenological "interviewing" does not intend to corroborate a preconceived hypothesis or opinion. Instead, by skilful, imaginative listening, and through description followed by a hermeneutic process, we used "conversation" as a means to discover the meaning of being a distance learner. Phenomenologically speaking, we "extend" conversation so that it gets to the essence of an experience. After our initial conversations, I returned to the co-researchers to clarify my understanding of their lived experiences, and to review with them their descriptions in a consultative manner. By delving into their experiences in this way, my interest intensified, and my appreciation for the importance and meaning of their situations deepened.

You might have noticed that I consciously use the word conversation, rather than interview. Interview is rooted from the French *entrevue*, which, in turn is from the Old French *entrevoir*; *entre* means "between", and *voir* means "to see." We are, however, trying to do more than "to see between." We are attempting to <u>understand within</u>. The *Oxford*

Dictionary of English Etymology (Onions, 1966) defines interview as a "meeting of persons face to face", and translates *entrevoir* as "having a glimpse of," and *s'entrevoir* as "see each other." In phenomenological hermeneutic research, we are not "glimpsing," and with some of the conversations in this particular study, we do not see each other or meet face to face. There are times when we used other tools to communicate. Interview is also associated with the Latin, *percontorari*, meaning to question, to ask, interrogate. Conversation, on the other hand, is good talk practiced as an art, or familiar with. In this study, it is the art of explicating a specific topic of interest with the researcher's role being one of a listener and interpreter, rather than an interrogator. Interviewing is a process of getting facts, whereas conversation connotes a deeper exploratory process. Converse is from the Middle English *conversen*, to associate with, from Old French *converser*, from Latin *conversari*. The Latin prefix *con* means "thorough(ly) with." *Versari* means "to occupy oneself." Converse is also rooted from the Latin *conversus*, which means "turned around." Phenomenological hermeneutic study does just that: occupies itself thoroughly with, and turns description around into deep and full interpretations that explicate meaning. Hence, this etymological overview explains my preference to use the word "conversation", rather then interview.

Conversations were taped; accompanied with some note taking. It was my task to search the recordings and the notes for significant moments, and to outline the themes within the documentation. Over and over again, I listened and re-listened to, read and re-read our conversations, and I grew to recognize the significance that the narratives have in describing the everyday lifeworlds of distance learners.

As I present the narratives to you, you will first read them in a style that suggests a relived experience in itself. I will share the protocol writing in its original draft state, and I

will tell about the conversations as they initially happened. On the second reading, you'll see the protocols and the conversations as "expanded readings." I agree with Evans (1989) that the middle step (Evans calls his middle step, interrupted readings) in the interpretive process provides "a conceptual bridge or transitional moment between the 'raw' narratives on the one hand, and the hermeneutic readings on the other. ... [T]he interrupted readings...aim to concretize (make visible) the secret movements of the mind... They are the mind's footprints, tracks in the sand which show that something passed this way" (p. 52). I also agree with Evans that the middle step creates "a space for the meanings to appear before us" (p. 53), but I have chosen to call the transitory step "expanded." The Latin, *interrumpere*, means to break up, smash, to divide, scatter. I see the bridge not as a "break" in the process, but rather as a way to develop, to unfold (from the Old French *desveloper*, and the modern, *développer*, meaning to expand, to spread out, to improve) the readings in order to discover the meanings, which are embedded in the depths of the descriptions. The Latin, *expandere*, means to spread out, unfold, expand.

The final look at the narratives is hermeneutic. Everything that precedes this third phase is in preparation for the hermeneutic (interpretive and explanatory) readings. Here, we look for insights, but we are not trying to justify any causal relations. Phenomenological hermeneutic research is not hypothesis testing, although hypotheses can be made from phenomenological hermeneutic studies. It is not that the readings are unbounded, for they are disciplined by the purpose of the research, which is to discover the essence of being a distance learner. They are informed readings, and they have been preceded with academic and philosophical preparations that lead to an understanding of "lived experience." As we read the hermeneutic readings, it is my hope that we can gain an understanding of some of the

issues that truly mean something and that are of importance in the lifeworlds of distance learners. If distance learning educators can better understand what it means to be a distance learner, then they should be able to improve the quality of the distance learning system, and to serve distance learners by making their situations better. If distance learners can gain a better awareness of their lived experiences by grasping the meaning of their lifeworlds, then they can add value to their learning and to other people's learning. Distance learners can evaluate the meaning of their distance learning experience, and they can put their narratives to productive use by sharing them in order to help others understand aspects of the distance learning system, aspects that affect distance learners. Ultimately, the meaning of the narratives has its full impact between the reader and the text.

Louise - Protocol Writing

When I began my Distance Education Master's Program, I was unaware of the many challenges, frustrations, rewards, and accomplishments I would have. I was faced with a problem, which required a lot of time and energy to resolve. One of my assignments was to do some research, e-mail assignments, and communicate using the Internet. At that time I did not even have a computer that was capable of being hooked up to the Internet. I decided that I needed to purchase a computer system and get on-line. September and October were filled with shopping excursions and many phone calls. As I live in a very small town, access to information was limited. October 23, I was finally on-line and sent my first e-mail message. I was filled with exhilaration at this accomplishment and it was reinforced when I received a message back from Don acknowledging my success. On October 24, in my journal I wrote, "This week has been particularly exciting because I am

finally on-line. The promise I made to Don has been fulfilled!! Although the preliminary confusion and frustration was at times uncomfortable, I'm sure that my new accomplishment will add much quality to my life and to the lives of others."

I received an e-mail message from Jane yesterday and from Don today to acknowledge my success. It feels great to have finally reached a goal that I have been committed to for five months. The power of VISION!"

This experience enhanced my life in many ways. I am free to communicate with my professors, mentors, friends, and other students at any time of day. I am able to access information that is not available to me in my small town. It also gave me a sense of power that I had not felt before, perhaps that I was on more of an equal playing field with other people in the world. The distance education course requirements committed me to a goal that I may not have pursued otherwise.

Protocol - Expanded Reading

[Italics indicate Louise's input; regular print is the author's; underlining is for emphasis]

When I began my Distance Education Master's Program, I was unaware of the many challenges, frustrations, rewards, and accomplishments I would have. [Louise begins her narrative with the suggestion of an omen.] *I was faced with a problem, which required a lot of time and energy to resolve.* [The omen is now a reality.] *One of my assignments was to do some research, e-mail assignments, and communicate using the Internet. At that time I did not even have a computer that was capable of being hooked up to the Internet.* [Louise states the problem and feels challenged.] *I decided that I needed to purchase a computer system and get on line. September and October were filled with shopping excursions and many*

phone calls. [Louise invests time, energy, and money in order to deal with her dilemma.] *As I live in a very small town, access to information was limited.* [Louise feels limited because of her more isolated environment.] *October 23, I was finally on line and sent my first e-mail message. I was filled with exhilaration* [being stimulated, refreshed, or elated] *at this accomplishment and it was reinforced when I received a message back from Don acknowledging my success* [success, recognition, excitement]. *On October 24, in my journal I wrote, "This week has been particularly exciting because I am finally on line.* [Louise has long-awaited for this moment.] *The promise I made to Don has been fulfilled!! Although the preliminary confusion and frustration was at times uncomfortable* [struggle], *I'm sure that my new accomplishment will add much quality to my life and to the lives of others."* [Because of her experience, Louise anticipates future benefits: a better life for herself and others.]

I received an e-mail message from Jane yesterday and from Don today to acknowledge my success. It feels great to have finally reached a goal that I have been committed to for five months. The power of VISION [hope–aspiration]!

This experience enhanced my life in many ways. [Louise repeats that her life is enhanced because of this experience.] *I am free to communicate with my professors, mentors, friends, and other students at any time of day. I am able to access information that is not available to me in my small town.* [Louise recognizes the limitations of her isolation and shares another opened opportunity.] *It also gave me a sense of power that I had not felt before, perhaps that I was on more of an equal playing field with other people in the world.* [Louise realizes a sense of power and equality with others. This new feeling generates from a growing sense of identity and a sense of belonging that nourishes the development of her positive self-esteem

and self-worth.] *The distance education course requirements committed me to a goal that I may not have pursued otherwise.* [Distance Education provided Louise with the unique opportunity to access a better future, to challenge herself in this way, to enjoy this stimulating event, and to benefit from this experience of personal growth.]

Protocol - Hermeneutic Reading

With this e-mail and Internet experience, Louise is faced with a not uncommon problem within the distance learning situation. She must broaden her knowledge of the technological tools available in the educational system, and learn skills that were not previously needed for her to pursue learning in the traditional method. Evaluating the experience from a cognitive view, we can say that Louise increased her knowledge about computers and their value to learning situations, about the Internet and its use for research purposes, and about the communicative assets of e-mail. What are the affective elements within this experience?

Her success with the e-mail leaves her with a feeling of exhilaration, an event that stimulates her, and an achievement that elates her, not only because she fulfills her promise, but also because of the recognition she receives and because it confirms for her a sense of mastery. This lived experience leaves her with a true sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. Louise is accustomed to mastering content, but now she must also learn a new method of delivery. This added expectation adds to her stress and consequently doubles her need for affirmation and recognition of her skills. Hence, Louise needs a strong word to describe her feelings for this event: "exhilaration." (The Latin prefix *ex* means "intensive".) Louise strongly anticipates that this new skill will not only make her life better, but will add to the quality of other lives as well. She expects the lives of her students, her family, and her

peers to all benefit from her "on-line" happening. By living through this series of events, Louise experiences the value of hope and aspires to positive changes. She feels free to communicate with so many more people now. Louise lives and works in a more isolated situation than many of her peers, this freedom to communicate enhances her personal and professional needs. Not only can she connect with others that are separated from her physical environment, but now she can interact with people any time of day or night. Her lived space and her lived time are expanded. Her opportunities are further improved because she can now access information, not previously readily available to her. This sense of increased opportunity is exciting for Louise. This excitement is rooted from her new sense of power, which affects her self-worth, self-esteem, sense of identity, and sense of belonging. Louise no longer feels so isolated; she joins her peers, whether they are from her professional, student, or personal life. Louise's sense of power and equality is intensified because she has gained recognition in the technology world. Her learning now includes new technology as a tool. Her "peer" world is expanded; learning and technology are combined.

Would this experience have been lived through in a non-distance learning situation? According to Louise, it is the "distance education course requirements (that) committed me to a goal that I may not have pursued otherwise." It is being a distance learner that pushes her into this particular situation, that challenges her, stimulates her, gives her access to a better future, and provides her this particular opportunity for personal growth.

Is Louise saying that she cannot gain some of the same benefits from other experiences in her life? No. There is no mistaking, however, that Louise feels that this lived experience is unique to the life world of a distance learner. It is being a distance learner that defines for her some unique attributes of the distance learning system. What does it mean to have been a

distance learner for Louise? What is the essence of the distance learning lifeworld for Louise?

Hope, freedom, a sense of power and equality gained from recognition and an expanded learning world, increased positive self-esteem and self-worth, a sense of belonging and identity, positive personal growth for both herself and people around her – these are all realities in the lifeworld of being a distance learner from Louise's lived experience as a distance learner.

Louise – The Setting

The conversational material is related in the first person, as it is a direct account from Louise. I choose to present these conversations in a summarized form because, in this way, the accounts are more concise and abbreviated for the reader, and then I follow them with the "expanded reading," which, in turn, is followed by the "hermeneutic reading."

Let me first describe to you the settings. Louise attended a conference near my home, and we decided to have our conversations in the privacy of my house. This allowed us to meet for a substantial amount of time without other members of her family present. She left her family, and my house was free. (No one else was there but Louise and I.) She attended her conference, and committed her free time to our being together. We mainly conversed over long drawn out meals, sitting comfortably around the table, letting the talk flow easily between us. I felt prepared, not only with my conversational materials, but I had also readied everything to make the environment warm and comfortable. I had taken care of eliminating phone interruptions. Louise and I felt focussed and ready for our conversations.

After I had finished the transcriptions and the interpretive work, Louise and I met again for the consultative review. I had previously sent her the materials, which she had examined. Louise had again travelled and was close to my home, this time, for a professional workshop. I drove in to meet her at the workshop centre. We found a private corner and easily began our discussions. Our dialogue was a good balance between professionalism and warmth, which encouraged honest and focussed interaction.

Louise – Conversations and Personal Documents

[Italics indicate Louise's input; regular print is the author's; underlining is for emphasis]

For me, distance learning was everywhere – in the car, while I was gardening-not restricting myself as I would in a classroom. I would bring my work to hockey games; I would make connections on the radio. When I was on campus, I didn't really feel that it consumed my life as much. Whereas, when I took distance ed. [distance education], *that was when it came into my life more, as it was more consuming, because I felt I was the person driving the course, whereas when I was on campus, it was more, mmm, it was a separation there. I would go to school and that course did not remain with me as much. Whereas when it was in my home, I felt it was more a part of me, more a part of my life. Distance ed. was with me all the time. There is a definite difference in feel. When I was at home, I knew I had to make this happen, and it was all up to me.*

I learned not to need as much feedback – to get the feedback from myself – to say to myself: "this is fine; this is okay; you're doing a good job" – almost like self-appraisal, rather than always having to have someone from the outside saying "yes, this is fine." I can say to myself: "Yes, this is fine," and just do it, rather then be always wondering, is it good

enough? Is it a good idea? And having to have it confirmed. I'd just do it, and it would usually be fine. I'd present it, and someone would say that was a great idea. You lose that fear of not being good enough, or failing. You just decide to just get on with it. My first course, I was scared to death, and then as I took course after course, I wasn't as frightened. Now, I'd take a distance ed. course, and I wouldn't even bat an eye... Now, I think I'm a lifelong learner, a true lifelong learner, because I don't need that feedback. Now, if I'm interested in something I know that from my situation in Timbuck [pseudonym of Louise's home community], *I can probably attempt anything, whereas before, I always felt I had to go to the city. But now I know I have within me the power and the ability to pursue whatever I want to pursue. That is a very powerful feeling because I'm not feeling restricted by living where I live. There are ways of doing whatever I want to do, and I discovered that through distance learning.*

Going back to the protocol about the e-mail and the feeling of exhilaration, Louise says, *the course requirement was that I had to e-mail something. So I knew I had to, but it was a very stressful time because I wanted to get it in place soon. And I think that's where the exhilaration came in too; it was because I had made a promise to this person who wrote back to me and was so proud of me for having done it – the recognition. There was a commitment there to him and to myself too: I'm going to do this, and when it was finally done, it was very, very exciting. When I e-mailed off, it was exciting, but the response was the most exciting because someone actually got the message, and you know, mmm, it all worked and they were also very proud of what I had done too. That compounded it I guess. I wasn't expecting them, any, anyone to respond, so it was kind of a surprise as well. The feeling of exhilaration had to do with following through with the commitment because at that point, I didn't know*

how I was going to do it. I didn't know anything about e-mail, or Internet. I didn't even know I could get it in Timbuck. It was an unknown to me, and I had to do a lot of work to get there, and I think, because I worked so hard, also, to get there – and it all worked! A lot of investment, time, energy, research, and money too.

And (underlined to accentuate the emphasis made by Louise) *the other thing is, my husband, like Patrick, he even picked up on it. He checks the mail every day; he's the mail checker. So it's kind of brought something new into his life as well. And the kids use it, and they communicate with people in other countries. So it really, it also opened a door for them. So I kind of felt that I had opened the door for them too. So it was a compounding, uniting feeling within the family. It never would have happened if I hadn't taken the distance learning courses that required me to do that, because it pushed me a little bit further. Otherwise I probably would never had done it. I know I wouldn't have done it otherwise. That's why I did it. Taking distance learning was an accident, but I'm glad it happened.*

Even though there are exasperating times, if you stick it out, you are stronger for it. Before it was [pause] *frightening, quite scary. And now it's not a problem. I don't think I would be who I am now if I hadn't have done it. I don't think I'd have the strength of character that I have now because I was quite insecure before, and I was afraid to take a stand on things. But I, just the confidence. I know it's changed me. I know* (pause) *for sure* (pause), *it's changed me as a person. Just that whole experience. Part of it is the struggle. I'm much stronger. I know I'm a decent person, and if it pleases me, it's probably okay. I'm not afraid to try new things now. I'm always making changes. I spend less time trying to make decisions about things. I just try it and I realize that if it doesn't work, well at least you've tried it, and I'm not afraid.* To take risks, is that what you're saying? *Yeah, yeah."*

You're more of a risk taker now then you were? *Definitely, definitely. I was not a risk-taker or a decision-maker. I still have trouble with the decision-making* (laugh). *I am a stronger person, a better person.*

Well, I'm not afraid, I'm not – well, there was an incident that, uh, with my aid. She was…, and I had to deal with that. Rather than skirt it, I dealt with it head on, and I wasn't afraid to approach her and deal with the situation. Whereas before, I probably would have just let it slide. This incident demonstrates the change in my character.

I suppose I'm much more resourceful. I'm looking past the immediate. I can make connections with people; I've used e-mail to make connections with other schools. I guess, using that as a tool to reach out to other communities. I guess my mind is a bit expanded. I can see other possibilities. I think a little more about what's really out there. That definitely comes from being a distance learner because I think it really broadened my world. It widened it for me. It wasn't that impossible, whereas before it was such a big deal. Mmm, there are other possibilities that I can make happen if I choose to.

With DE [Distance Education], *I did feel so isolated and alone. I needed to know that there were other people there, to draw from and to talk to. I think you do tend to reach out a bit more. It's not going to happen unless you make it happen. In a classroom setting, you're all together, you've gotten together, and everything is organized. Whereas when you're studying on your own, you need some support, you have to pursue it yourself. They physically aren't there, so I think you do tend to do that naturally.*

I've told you before that distance learning was more part of my life. I basically brought it into my home. It became more a part of my life and of the people around me. I felt it was a more home-orientated thing. It became a together thing [Louise was talking about her

spouse]. *In that sense, I think our relationship was strengthened by it. And the family, I think the same way, because you are relying and interacting more, become closer, because they're helping you with your goal. That's the way I viewed it; I viewed it as kind of a shared goal. Distance learning has more of an effect on relationships around you. The distance learning experience itself made me stronger; it affected my character.*

At the beginning, I didn't understand that perhaps change may be our lifelong friend. But I understood it later, that it was being able to change and accept change, not the specific changes, but that accepting change in your life is part of adapting and living, so it is a lifelong friend if you are adaptable. And, like, with distance learning, it is always changing, because you're always having new approaches to things. Classroom seems much more stable and the same delivery system was there, the teacher was there, lectured or whatever, set assignments, but in distance learning, there were different formats. It was always different for me.

I was coming to deal with things on my own. And I had to talk to myself, and to be honest with myself. I feel very strongly about that, because I did so much distance learning, umm, it did, it just made me a stronger person, and able to deal with difficult situations in a better way, rather than avoiding it. It may come into play in classrooms as well, but it was much more demanding in DE. I just feel I can deal with situations in a better way, and I could be honest with people, not just with myself, but with other people. I wasn't afraid to say "I have a problem with this." Before DE, I wouldn't even approach the person or the situation; I'd just let it go, and try to get out of the situation and remove myself from it rather than make it better.

"Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go." I didn't really understand what Elliot was talking about until later on in the distance learning experience. There are things within you that will blossom or come out if you push yourself. I guess that's a whole personal development thing. I didn't know I was actually a strong person when I first started, but then in the end, I realized there was a strength within I could tap and use. For example, when I realized I was going to have to be hooked up on the Internet, I thought, "oh, my god, I can't, how am I going to do this?" You know. That whole feeling of 'Can I do this?' And then realizing that 'yes, you can.' But just struggling through it, that whole struggling aspect of it all, and then finding out that you can do that, and realizing there's all sorts of challenges out there that you don't need to shut the door to, that if you really want to, you can do it.

In my mindset, happiness, the ultimate was to be finished, but it's not, and I think I discovered that. It's the learning and the process."

Conversations - Expanded Reading

When Louise and I began talking she immediately initiated our conversation around her lived space as a distance learner. With distance learning, Louise feels that distance learning became an activity that was *everywhere – in the car, while I was gardening-not restricting myself as I would in a classroom. ... I would bring my work to hockey games ... I would make connections on the radio.* Distance learning is a catalyst that broadens Louise's learning experience, so that she associates her learning everywhere, rather than confining it in the classroom.

As Louise describes her lived space, she begins to share narratives about what in the distance learning experience affected her personal development. *When I was on campus, I didn't really feel that it consumed my life as much, whereas when I took Distance Ed., that was when it came into my life more, as it was more consuming because I felt I was the person driving the course, whereas when I was on campus, it was more, mmm, it was a separation there. I would go to school and that course did not remain with me as much. Whereas when it was in my home, I felt it was more a part of me, more a part of my life. Distance Ed. was with me all the time. There is a definite difference in feel. When I was at home, I knew I had to make this happen, and it was all up to me.* Later, Louise returns again to her lived space and lived time as a distance learner. She repeats how it was everywhere and all the time. *I'd ask myself questions all the time. I would pose questions, "why is that? Why is that?"* And that wouldn't happen in a classroom situation? *I didn't feel there was time because it was divided; I divided it myself mentally, I think. I didn't really bring it into my life. In a classroom, I didn't have as much time to process things, so I would kind of go to class and think about it, and then, that was separate from* (pause) *what was happening. I separated classroom studies from my regular life.*

Louise then went on to add that she personally has a need for contact with her instructors and how the e-mail aspect of distance learning helped her to deal with issues quickly. *I learned not to need as much feedback – to get the feedback from myself – to say to myself: "this is fine; this is okay; you're doing a good job" – and, almost like self-appraisal, rather than always having to have someone from the outside saying "yes, this is fine." I can say to myself: "Yes, this is fine," and just do it, rather then be always wondering, is it good enough? Is it a good idea? And having to have it confirmed. I'd just do it, and it would*

usually be fine. I'd present it, and someone would say that was a great idea. Louise also told me that you can evaluate your weaknesses as well. She learned to be able to tell herself, not only that it was fine, but also that it wasn't fine. *You lose that fear of not being good enough, or failing. You just decide to just get on with it. My first course, I was scared to death, and then as I took course after course, I wasn't as frightened. Now, I'd take a Distance Ed. course, and I wouldn't even bat an eye.*

Now, I think I'm a lifelong learner, a true lifelong learner, because I don't need that feedback. Now, if I'm interested in something, I know that from my situation in Timbuck, I can probably attempt anything, whereas before, I always felt I had to go to the city. But now I know I have within me the power and the ability to pursue whatever I want to pursue. That is a very powerful feeling because I'm not feeling restricted by living where I live. There are ways of doing whatever I want to do, and I discovered that through distance learning.

We extended this part of the conversation even further and delved into the meaning of some of her language. Louise described to me what "lifelong learner" and "true learner" meant: *I now can pursue things on my own. You are always learning, but instead of waiting for opportunities to happen, I consciously pursue learning.* Louise describes it as a *determined feeling-I can do it*, not only because of access, but because as a distance learner, she has come to know that *nothing is really impossible. In distance learning, you have to pursue it. You don't just sit there like in a classroom. You have to make it happen. For example, at a conference, I would have just listened and left, and not seek to get all I can.* As a distance learner, Louise feels she has learned *to create the time, and now I like learning as much as I can get.* Louise feels that being a distance learner has changed her. There are affective elements that have been influenced in her personal development. She is more self-

reliant; she has lost the fear of failure; she is a more independent learner. Being a distance learner has empowered Louise to be a lifelong learner. At the root of distance learning is the potential of being a lifelong learner.

Going back to the protocol about the e-mail and the feeling of exhilaration, the course requirement was that I had to e-mail something. I knew I had to, but it was a very stressful time because I wanted to get it in place soon. And I think that's where the exhilaration came in too, was because I had made a promise to this person who wrote back to me and was so proud of me for having done it – the recognition. There was a commitment there to him and to myself too: I'm going to do this, and, uh, when it was finally done, it was very, very exciting. When I e-mailed off, it was exciting, but the response was the most exciting because someone actually got the message, and you know, umm, it all worked and they were also very proud of what I had done too. That compounded it, I guess. I wasn't expecting them, any, anyone to respond, so it was kind of a surprise as well. The feeling of exhilaration had to do with following through with the commitment because at that point, I didn't know how I was going to do it. I didn't know anything about e-mail, or Internet. I didn't even know I could get it in Timbuck. It was an unknown to me, and I had to do a lot of work to get there, and I think, because I worked so hard, also, to get there – and it all worked! A lot of investment, time, energy, research, and money too.

And the other thing is, my husband, like Patrick, he even picked up on it. He checks the mail every day; he's the mail checker. So it's kind of brought something new into his life as well. And the kids use it, and they communicate with people in other countries. So it really, it also opened a door for them. So I kind of felt that I had opened the door for them too. So it was, it was a compounding, uniting feeling within the family. It never would have

happened if I hadn't taken the distance learning courses that required me to do that, because it pushed me a little bit further. Otherwise I probably would never had done it. I know I wouldn't have done it otherwise. That's why I did it.

Taking distance learning was an accident, but I'm glad it happened. Louise is truly thankful to have been a distance learner. Louise lives through the experience of "pain producing gain." She feels responsible for opening the door for new experiences for her husband and their children. When we extended the conversation, Louise correlated struggle and investment with excitement; she said more struggle = more excitement.

Louise continues her narrative about her lived experience as a distance learner, and adds that she had gathered from other distance learners that it was hard to be a distance learner, and that those feelings became validated as she lived through the experience personally. She concludes that *even though there are exasperating times, if you stick it out, you are stronger for it. I don't think I would be who I am now if I hadn't have done it. I don't think I'd have the strength of character that I have now because I was quite insecure before, and I was afraid to take a stand on things. But I, just the confidence. I know it's changed me. I know* [pause] *for sure* [pause], *it's changed me as a person. Just that whole experience. Part of it is the struggle. I'm much stronger. I'm not afraid to try new things. I'm always making changes. I spend less time trying to make decisions about things. I just try it and I realize that if it doesn't work, well* [pause], *at least you've tried it, and I'm not afraid.* To take risks. *Yah, yah.* You're more of a risk taker now then you were? *Definitely, definitely. I was not a risk-taker or a decision-maker. I still have trouble with the decision-making...*[laugh]. Louise's laugh was a comfortable one. She wasn't putting herself down, or acting nervously. I am a stronger person, a better person.

Louise recounts her narrative about the aid, where she describes how she was *not afraid, and dealt with it head on*. She also shared two other narratives that she felt demonstrated her change in character. She had incidents with her administrator and a professor where she says, *being a distance learner, she has learned not to be afraid, to have the strength in me in knowing that I can be honest with my opinions and principles...that she is stronger*. Later, Louise defines being honest as a person who accepts themselves. She feels that *people need to accept themselves first before they can successfully become part of a learning community. They need to be honest with self-evaluations and to value their principles.*

I suppose I'm much more resourceful. I'm looking past the immediate. I can make connections with people- using e-mail as a tool to reach out to other communities. I guess my mind is a bit expanded. I can see other possibilities. I think a little more about what's really out there. That definitely comes from being a distance learner because I think it really broadened my world. It widened it for me. It isn't that impossible, whereas before it was such a big deal. There are other possibilities that I can make happen if I choose to. Louise went on to explain that because distance learning has made her more innovative, and has broadened her world, it has, in turn, widened the world of others whom she influences. She and people in her environment now "reach out" together. Later, I learned that Louise is an inspiration to other people in her community. She was the first person ever connected to the Internet in Timbuck and is now called upon as a local computer expert.

Sounds like it's been very positive for you. *Oh, Terribly!* [Pause] *Pride and, or a* [pause], *a sort of, I can look at myself and say, 'I did it, I did that, and I didn't think you could.'* Although Louise mentions pride, she pauses and then describes feelings of risk, struggle, power, and growth. Later on, Louise defines maturity as being able to see that little

things are not going to be a problem; being able to put things in perspective; not defeating yourself; not putting yourself down. As a distance learner, she is adamant that the experience has matured her.

With DE, I did feel isolated and alone. I needed to know that there were other people there, to draw from and to talk to. I think you do tend to reach out a bit more with DE. It's not going to happen unless you make it happen. In a classroom setting, you're all together, you've gotten together, and everything is organized. Whereas when you're studying on your own, you need some support, you have to pursue it yourself.

I've told you before that distance learning was more part of my life than the classroom model had been. I basically brought it into my home; it became more a part of my life and of the people around me. I felt it was a more home-orientated thing. It became a together thing [Louise was talking about her spouse]. *In that sense, I think our relationship was strengthened by it. And the family, the family I think, I think the same. Distance learning has more of an effect on relationships around you. The distance learning experience itself made me stronger; it affected my character.*

Accepting change in your life is part of adapting and living, so it is a lifelong friend if you are adaptable. With distance learning, it is always changing, because you're always having new approaches to things. Classroom seems much more stable and the same delivery system was there, the teacher was there, lectured or whatever, set assignments, but in distance learning, there were different formats. It was always different for me.

I was coming to deal with things on my own. And I had to talk to myself, and to be honest with myself. I feel very strongly about that, because I did so much distance learning, mmm, it did, it just made me a stronger person, and able to deal with difficult situations in a

better way, rather than avoiding it. It may come into play in classrooms as well, but it was much more demanding (in DE). I just feel I can deal with situations in a better way, and I can be honest with people, not just with myself, but with other people. Before DE, I'd try to get out of the situation and remove myself from it rather than make it better. Learning to be honest with ourselves is one of the most important skills we can learn, according to Louise. *If you're honest with yourself, it's a lot easier to make some decisions, some choices. That's a really important skill. It's almost like self-talk. It's a way of keeping yourself motivated, and not giving up on things because you can admit to yourself that you don't get it, that's okay, and you accept that.* Louise feels that one of the essences of being a distance learner is to become honest with yourself in order to develop self-evaluation skills and independent learning approaches. In so doing a distance learner generalizes the use of these skills in other aspects of his/her life.

"Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go." I didn't really understand what Elliot was talking about until later on in the distance learning experience. There are things within you that will blossom or come out if you push yourself. I guess that's a whole personal development thing. I didn't know I was actually a strong person when I first started, but then in the end, I realized there was a strength within I could tap and use. That whole feeling of "Can I do this?" And then realizing that "yes, you can," struggling through it. Through the struggle, Louise realizes that *there's all sorts of challenges out there that you don't need to shut the door to, that if you really want to, you can do it.*

Distance learning pushes Louise to do things she had not envisioned doing before.

To clarify and try to understand Louise better, I said, "So you're saying that at the root of distance learning, you have to accept risk. *Yes.* You have to accept change. *Mm-hmm.* Because of these risks, because of these changes, there is struggle (*yes*), and because of the struggle, there is growth, there is strength that builds within you, there is character building, etc. *Mm-hmm.* That is what you are saying. *Right!.*

In my previous mindset, happiness, the ultimate was to be finished, but it's not, and I think I discovered that. It's the learning and the process. Being a distance learner transformed Louise into a lifelong learner.

Documents

Louise kept a time line that stretched over ten metres of my living area at home, plus two three and a half-inch binders packed with journal writing. I took advantage of this documentation that Louise made available to me. Before we proceed to the hermeneutic reading, I'd like to share a few things with you from these documents.

As I fell asleep I took T. S. Elliot with me and hoped that his statement was true: "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go." I was struck with the display of courage this journal entry denoted. As I read this thought of Louise's, I sensed the fear and the tremendous hope that was within her being at the time. As Louise continued being a distance learner, she returned to visit T. S. Elliot's quote.

Five months later after her encounter with Elliot, Louise writes in her journal about a personal and medical ordeal she must endure. Here is a part of the description that she uses to share that time: speaking of her family, she says, *I love them so much it makes me want to cry. At times I feel strong and determined to carry on as usual but it is difficult. The pain*

makes it difficult to focus. It's funny when things seem to be rolling along just fine how much an accident like this can change your life. I suppose I should look at this as a challenge to see how well I really do adapt to change!

A few days later, Louise reads a passage from Holman (1995), "Look at a crisis as a challenge. See it as a possibility to come up with a new, possibly better way of doing something" (p. 107). As we examine Louise's experience as a distance learner, we can see how she grew not to be afraid, to accept risk, and yes, to adapt to change.

Louise relates in her journal that *emotions tend to have quite a bit to do with learning. I believe that fear and anxiety adversely affect most kinds of thinking*. She then describes a narrative about herself that exemplifies her opinion, and explains how anxiety stifles her. She feels that educators *need to make sure students feel comfortable*. A month later she adds, *if you teach students to become responsible for their learning, you educate them for a lifetime*.

The journal confirms her growth as a lifelong learner. In fact, she writes later, *I viewed my journey (educational pursuit) as an uphill climb towards a destination. I referred to this journey as if it were a struggle to reach greater heights. I have come to understand that my journey is an enjoyable one that should never end. I have learned that the quality of the process is more important than the product. I have also learned that constant change is part of life and that our goal should not be to reach equilibrium but to constantly adapt to our everchanging world. As Margaret Wheatley (1994) has stated, "Equilibrium is the stage closest to death for the living system, but we haven't known that. We have thought that when we are at equilibrium, everything's fine, and that it is change that causes our disintegration."*

Louise then gives a narrative in her journal about how she entered chaos and came out of the experience *with a strong sense of self and a vision for the future*.

Louise's journal confirms the description within our conversations about her personal development. *I was pleased when I realized that the needs I had are not the needs I have today. I think I have grown tremendously in self-confidence*. She adds how she now realizes the importance of self-assessment, and the need to encourage students to accomplish their own best work. In addition, Louise adds, *as I have become more secure within myself I have been able to reach out to others and have become more capable of establishing relationships with others.*

In her journal, Louise writes that she agrees with Warren Bennis that people learn to be leaders through difficult experiences, and when they face adversity. As a distance learner, Louise feels she has faced hardship and that her distance learning journey has been one faced with difficulties. Having distance learning in her lifeworld, Louise feels she can say, *I am glad that I am now a risk-taker*.

Louise appreciates her personal growth, not only for her development, but *I feel that this personal growth and pursuit of technological advancement helped me (with my professional situation). I feel that this is an example of growth from the inside-out; my personal commitment has extended into my world of work* by helping me develop *meaningful and fulfilling* projects.

In her journal, I found a diagram that Louise drew describing her growth from dependence, through independence, to interdependence. In the box with interdependence is the word "honesty." Beside the box, some of the words are: "empowerment, willingness to change, risk-taking, trust, shared experiences, enlightened." Louise explains: *what is*

significant is that the process is more important than the product. We affect people by our "wholeness" and our "whatness." The essence of who and what we are impacts people. And what is the essence of the phenomenological hermeneutic method as used in this study? Discovering the essence, the "whatness" of being a distance learner. As Louise discovers her "whatness," she does so partly through her experience as a distance learner.

I also found an unused card that had obviously caught Louise's sentiments as a distance learner. I think the card picks up an important difference between the cognitive and the affective elements in a learning situation. Cognition, that is the mental process of knowing, is important. (Cognition is from Middle English *cognicioun*, from Latin *cognitio, cognition-*, from *cognitus*, past participle of *cognoscere*, get to know: *co-*, intensive Latin prefix, together + *gnoscere*, to know + -tion, Latin suffix, indicating the state of knowing.) So although "to know in common" is grand, imagine the grander "to learn to want to know." The emotional need to continuously learn is a valuable asset. To learn to want to know as a continuous part of personal development is an affective quality. What did the card say?

"If I could wish
for My life to be
perfect, it would
be tempting but
I wouLd decline,
for life wouLd
No LongeR teach
Me Anything."

Allyson Jones

Conversations - Hermeneutic Reading

As Louise shares with us her description of her lived experience as a distance learner, she begins by giving us an account of her lived space ("spatiality", van Manen, 1990, pp. 102-103). Louise's distance learning experience affects the way she feels about her learning space. She now feels this space to be wide-open, immense, one that exposes her to a broadened world and frees her from a limited environment. Although greatly expanded, her lived space and its temporary times of chaos, develop, rather than inhibit her feelings of belonging. Van Manen (1990) tells us that home is where we can often "*be* what *we are*" (p. 102). Louise finds that being a distance learner helps her to discover who she is, and helps her be what she is. By telling us that spatiality within the context of distance learning has the quality of being "everywhere", and by mentioning at least four times how distance learning broadens and widens her world, Louise is feeling a new freedom to learn. The qualitative dimension Louise gives as she describes her day-to-day lived space with distance learning uncovers the meaning of learning as a lived experience that for her, holds no exclusive elements.

Louise also describes for us temporality (lived time) as a distance learner (van Manen, 1990, p. 104). According to van Manen, the temporal way of being in the world for a young person is to be oriented to an open and beckoning future. Using this concept as an analogy for Louise's situation, distance learning has rejuvenated her because she now feels that as a distance learner, she has discovered "an open and beckoning future." Louise feels she can now go anywhere, pursue whatever she wants to pursue; her future is not limited as it was before. Louise's "temporal landscape" (p. 104) is altered.

Louise describes herself as changed (at least thirteen times). Who she is now is no longer who she once was (a transformational experience). Her hopes and expectations are not only realized, they are intensified. In addition, Louise conveys to us that distance learning is a part of her life, with her all the time. Again, she describes a limitless situation, all consuming and lifelong.

What are Louise's new horizons? (Late Middle English *orizon*, from Old French, from Latin, from Greek *horizon* (*kuklos*), (circle), horizon, from present participle of *horizein*, to limit, from *horos*, boundary.) Louise says that the being a distance learner means having opportunities to be continuous with her learning. She now can break from a more linear mold to a circular one, one without boundaries.

What are qualities within distance learning that in its essence affects Louise's sense of meaningfulness? Certainly, Louise describes "struggle" as lying at the root of being a distance learner. What is the purpose of all this struggle? In her narration, Louise shares over and over again many feelings about the element of empowerment. Let's list some of these qualities which she characterizes as personal development:

1. I was driving; it was all up to me.
2. I lost my sense of failure.
3. I can attempt anything now.
4. I have the power and the ability within me to pursue whatever I want to pursue.
5. I am not restricted.
6. I know now there is always a way to do things.
7. I can empower others too.
8. I have been given recognition.

9. I am a better person.

10. I am more honest about myself and with others.

11. My character has been strengthened.

12. I am a risk-taker.

13. I am stronger, I am stronger, I am stronger.

14. I have developed self-assessment skills.

What does she equate struggle with? Exhilaration. These are attributes that the affective components of distance learning nurture. Nurturing these emotive qualities means that educators have an opportunity to provide exhilarating, stimulating lifeworlds for people. If students are exhilarated by their learning experiences, as Louise was, then an essential quality of being a distance learner is to be a lifewide and a lifelong learner.

What does it mean to Louise to be a distance learner? It means hope and freedom because the future promises to offer a lifeworld that includes an expanded learning world and personal development. It means opportunity, the opportunity to become a better, stronger, and more honest person because of a strengthened self-esteem. At the very essence of distance learning lies the journey of risk ➜ change ➜ struggle ➜ growth ➜ personal development (self-worth) ➜ power/equality (a sense of belonging), which gives real life to dreams. At the root of being a distance learner for Louise has been the realization that learning is lifewide and lifelong.

Consultative Review

Louise and I settled in our cozy chairs and comfortably eased into our consultative review. I welcomed her input as we reviewed all her materials. Louise did not feel that any

changes were needed, although she commented that studying the narratives and the readings was an interesting experience that she found enlightening. Louise referred back to "the power of vision" written in her protocol:

> *There is hope, even though you think there may not be a possibility of accomplishing that, it's there; the hope is there, the aspiration too.* You can aspire to things that maybe you couldn't before. *Mm-hmmm; you've really covered it well.*

We moved to the conversation transcriptions:

> *It's very strange to read what you've said. You know it's exactly what you stated.* Hearing yourself again, kind of thing. *You do; you do.* I wonder if that means that you feel you're hearing yourself, if I've been able to catch also the way you spoke and that kind of thing. You know when you put in the "mm-hmms" and the pauses, [pause] and the way that you spoke, I wonder if you're hearing that when you read that. *Oh, I'm sure. I think I tend to emphasize points that I feel very strongly about, and repeat them to make sure that that the message is there.* Actually that makes it easier for me. *Ohh*? When somebody repeats something, it may be something that has influenced them more, that means more to them, that - *impacted* - the impact is there, yes.

Louise agreed that the spatiality of distance learning was a significant point that she had talked about. She reiterated that as a distance learner she felt less confined than with classroom-based learning, that distance learning is an experience that she could take and feel everywhere.

According to Louise, she made many significant statements that related to personal development. My interpretations coincided with this.

Regarding lifelong learning, Louise said:

> *Oh, that's good. That's been good-the potential of being a lifelong learner.* So that's really important, a significant part of your lived experience, the lifelong learning. Okay, a developmental approach, rather than a goal - *mm-hmm, never finished).* Okay.

As Louise continued to reflect upon the text, she nodded with agreement that distance learning enhanced her learning because it presents learners with extra challenges and that distance learning made her a risk-taker.

Important for me were Louise's comments that related to my ability to help with the narratives:

> Before I was listening to your description *(mm-hmm)* and trying to help you continue your description. *mm-hmm. Oh definitely. I felt that you didn't want to influence me, at all. In our previous conversations, I felt you didn't want me to know what you were thinking in order not to bias what I was saying.*
>
> I wanted you to describe. I didn't want you to approve or disapprove, or to evaluate. *No, and that was quite clear, and I felt that you just wanted to listen to everything I had to say. It was good in that respect because I had <u>not</u> a clue what you would have expected me to say, or wanted me to say at all. It was totally-I was expressing exactly want I felt, which was probably good.* Well, that's what I wanted. I wanted you to describe your feelings of the experience at the time it happened, not after going back on it, or interpreting it. *But I even noticed myself sometimes waiting for a response from you, and you wouldn't say anything. You would just say, "mm-*

hmm or whatever." Did that cause a stiltedness in the - *not really.* Okay. *I just noticed that. I knew there was probably a reason for that. You did converse as well, but you really didn't lead me anywhere.* Okay. There would be a balance there that I would want to hit for sure. I would want to make sure that I did not lead you, like you said, but I certainly wouldn't want to make the conversation so stilted that you felt uncomfortable. I would want you to feel comfortable to share. *Oh no, I felt terribly comfortable to share everything.*

Now when you say "I wasn't leading you," that confirms for me that I wasn't controlling your input, even subconsciously. *No, not at all.* I wanted to check on that. *I would say definitely not.*

In other words, the dialogue is an activity that accesses the inner-world of a distance learner's personal experience. When we did talk about anything in particular, I want to make sure you didn't feel I was trying to lead you in a particular direction, to try and get you to express a particular sentiment, but I did make sure that we kept the conversation going. I just want to make sure that you never felt I had an ulterior purpose or motive, trying to persuade you in any way. *No, no, not at all.* Okay, good, I just wanted to make sure. *I just thought that you wanted to hear what I had to say about distance learning.*

Did I keep the question of the meaning of the phenomenon totally open for you? *This is one of the things that I thought back on, when I got back home-that feeling of your not directing my stories, was interesting because I just explored everything*

then. I went into personal things, things that happened at school, lots of different areas. My nondirective approach led you to be more expanded, or it extended your description of the whole picture. *That's right, because I was more apt to include a lot of different areas, rather than be focussed on a specific area that I thought you might be interested in hearing about, because I didn't know what you wanted to hear. So I just kept adding everything.*

We've gone through the methodology, the significant statements, and the themes. As a conclusion, do you feel that I understand how you feel about being a distance learner? *Yes.* What you feel about the meaning of being a distance learner, do you think that I have been able to understand that? *Yes.*

(The above is a summary of the consultation time between Louise and me. A detailed account of the consultation with Louise is in appendix B.)

CHAPTER FIVE

AXEL - "GLEEFUL MOMENTS"

Leading Up to Axel's Narratives

Axel examined his orientation materials, sent his biography, and proceeded to work on his protocol writings. Protocol narratives arrived by e-mail, and all contact up to that date was by phone or e-mail. After the protocol work, the time came for our conversations. Axel and I made arrangements to meet. We had been experiencing heavy snowfall throughout our province, and I was glad that I had decided to travel by bus, instead of driving myself in the car. Due to distance, the trip lasted through the night. It was nice to let the bus driver take control of the travelling, and as I made my way to Axel, I rested and relaxed. Bus transfers went better than expected, and before I knew it, I was on the boat, crossing the waters, getting me even closer to my destination. On the boat, I reviewed Axel's writings, and my preparatory materials. As we neared land again, I enjoyed the early morning outside. The wind from the moving vessel felt wonderful on my face and through my hair. The air was winter crisp and pleasant, and I savoured the feeling of the unknowns before me. I felt ready, alert, and enjoyed the curious mix of feeling vibrant and relaxed at the same time. After a little more bus time, I arrived to a preplanned meeting place. Due to the location of Axel's home, Axel felt it was much easier to meet me and drive us to his home. The trip to his rural location allowed us to warm up to the conversations ahead. On arrival, I met family, pets, and toured his surroundings briefly. We quickly settled to a private time at the kitchen table and began taping. The conversations were thorough and relaxed. In between talks, Axel would work at his computer, and I prepared for more conversational time together. The

conversations led right into some consultative review. In Axel's case, then, the expanded reading and the first consultative review time is simultaneous. As I travelled back home, I felt I carried with me a precious backpack containing our conversations.

Axel - Protocol Writings

What Being a Distance Learner Means

I am including two events as I am not sure if the first one qualifies as a "distance learning experience" as it involves meeting people f2f [face-to-face].

1. After having been in the DE [Distance Education] program for over a year and having taken four courses, I had begun to run into the same people in a number of courses. I had begun to get a sense of their views, cognitive style, sense of humour, feelings towards their "classmates" and general manner. All of these impressions had been built up over many posts in the computer conference portions of the course. In some cases I had built up a mental picture of these people, their ages and general demeanor. In no case had I really put much mental effort into how I thought they might look or act away from CMC [computer-mediated communications].

Then in 1998 I went to the NDE conference and distance learning workshop in Diver. I was on the plane with a friend who is also in the DE program. We were just getting settled on the plane when I noticed another man sitting two rows in front of us. He was chatting with the person beside him and something struck me as very familiar about him after listening to him talk for a few minutes. He didn't look at all familiar and so I chalked it up to one of those "weird things." About twenty minutes into the flight he pulled out a textbook (the same one I had in my pack) and started to read. I knew that there were two people in my

current course who lived in Willem [where the flight originated], but had no idea if they were going to NDE. I went up to talk to this gentleman and sure enough he was a DE student and was in my class.

Once at the technology workshop we all gathered in a lecture hall and one of the faculty introduced everyone to a chorus of "ohs." This simple experience of seeing fellow students for the first time simply reinforced my feeling that I "knew" these people, having worked with many of them, sharing new learnings and common complaints (I didn't hear many DE students who didn't complain about Bogan). All of this brought up curious feelings of isolation and connection, much as the second experience described below does.

2. Once again, having been in the program for a year and a half, I found myself involved in a pilot project, taking place in my school district. A group within the district was going to develop a grade 12 course to be delivered over the web. I had thought that my contribution would simply be to offer some hints as to how to adapt a f2f course to distance delivery. As it turns out I ended up taking a far more substantive role in this project. The reason that this qualifies as a distance education experience is because I had been spending a lot of time learning about distance education, interacting with others only via CMC and the very occasional phone call from one of the faculty tasked with keeping track of my progress. I had spent many many hours on my own, studying, writing, preparing for computer conferences, etc. while taking my courses, and while I was aware I was learning a variety of information and techniques, somehow it didn't seem quite "real," having not applied any of it or having really done any of it face to face. I have taken other courses before, f2f, and not really had the same sense of not having done "it," whatever the "it" of the course was. I

guess my point is that once I started to go to meetings for this pilot project that I started to apply what I had learned in isolation, or at least isolation except for CMC. Somehow being able to talk about various ideas and concepts with people f2f made it all seem more real and made me realize just how much I had learned, something I would not have realized without my involvement in this project.

Protocol – Expanded Readings

[Italics indicate Axel's input; regular print the author's; underlining is for emphasis]

What Being a Distance Learner Means

I am including two events, as I am not sure if the first one qualifies as a "distance learning experience" as it involves meeting people f2f. [This is an interesting comment because it is the first narrative that Axel questions as a distance learning experience, and not the second. The first narrative is an event that Axel experienced as a distance learner, but that involved a face-to-face encounter, which reinforced his feelings about existing connectivity in his distance learning environment. The second narrative is actually a face-to-face event that happened because Axel developed skills in his distance learning program that led to his involvement with a face-to-face project.]

1. *After having been in the DE program for over a year and having taken four courses, I had begun to run into the same people in a number of courses. I had begun to get a sense* [sense, from the Latin, *sensus*, faculty of feeling or actual perception, sensibility, sensation, mode of feeling, thought, meaning] *of their views, cognitive style, sense of humour,* [At a distance, Axel is able to go beyond the cognitive elements, and relate with affective qualities.], *feelings towards their "classmates" and general manner.* [Axel sees how his

peers feel toward each other, and even gets a sense of their general manner.] *All of these impressions had been built up over many posts in the computer conference portions of the course. In some cases I had built up a mental picture of these people, their ages and general demeanor. In no case had I really put much mental effort into how I thought they might look or act away from CMC.*

Then in 1998 I went to the NDE conference and distance learning workshop in Diver. I was on the plane with a friend who is also in the DE program. We were just getting settled on the plane when I noticed another man sitting two rows in front of us. He was chatting with the person beside him and something struck me as very familiar about him after listening to him talk for a few minutes. [Axel had never "listened" to this man before in a face-to-face encounter, but had "listened" to him through interaction opportunities available from his distance learning experience. Yet, through the face-to-face listening, Axel "hears" the voice of someone already familiar to him.] *He didn't look at all familiar and so I chalked it up to one of those "weird things." About twenty minutes into the flight he pulled out a textbook (the same one I had in my pack) and started to read. I knew that there were two people in my current course who lived in Willem* [where the flight originated], *but had no idea if they were going to NDE. I went up to talk to this gentleman and sure enough he was a DE student and was in my class.* The connection is real.

Once at the technology workshop we all gathered in a lecture hall and one of the faculty introduced everyone to a chorus of "ohs." [It would seem that Axel is not alone in the realization that these DE peers already "knew" each other. The "chorus" of people join him now in this realization; they already have a past of having known each other, having joined together before through their distance learning interaction. This incident reinforces the

feeling of togetherness, of commonality, and a feeling of unity.] *This simple experience of seeing fellow students for the first time simply reinforced my feeling that I "knew" these people, having worked with many of them, sharing new learnings and common complaints(I didn't hear many DE students who didn't complain about Bogan).* [This is a past connection, obviously already established from distance learning interaction.] *All of this brought up curious feelings of isolation and connection, much as the second experience described below does.* [Curious, in the objective sense, is from the French, *curiosité*, which indicates an eager desire to know. Axel, in his biography, defines curiosity as wanting "to learn more and expand my horizons." How does Axel relate isolation and connection? Although the second narrative is a face-to-face event, which occurred because of distance learning, let us look at it and see if this description helps to explain the meaning of isolation and connection within Axel's distance learning lifeworld.]

2. *Once again, having been in the program for a year and a half, I found myself involved in a pilot project, taking place in my school district. A group within the district was going to develop a grade 12 course to be delivered over the web. I had thought that my contribution would simply be to offer some hints as to how to adapt a f2f course to distance delivery. As it turns out I ended up taking a far more substantive role in this project. The reason that this qualifies as a distance education experience is because I had been spending a lot of time learning about distance education, interacting with others only via CMC and the very occasional phone call from one of the faculty tasked with keeping track of my progress. I had spent many many hours on my own* [Is Axel feeling isolated, burdened with work, or expressing the quantity of information/knowledge that he is getting?], *studying, writing,*

preparing for computer conferences, etc. while taking my courses, and while I was aware I was learning a variety of information and techniques, somehow it didn't seem quite "real", having not applied any of it or having really done any of it face to face. [Is the emphasis on the need for relevancy, application, the desire for an experiential quality that validates learning, or for face-to-face interaction? Since Axel can apply his expertise via a distance mode (for example, designing a course to be delivered on the web for an educational facility or group that is not local), it is his need to share, to apply his knowledge that predominates this comment.] *I have taken other f2f courses before and not really had the same sense of not having done 'it', whatever the 'it' of the course was.* [For the course to feel real, Axel must apply it, and this is even more necessary when the course is delivered via a distance format.]

I guess my point is that once I started to go to meetings for this pilot project that I started to apply what I had learned in isolation, or at least isolation except for CMC. Somehow being able to talk about various ideas and concepts with people f2f made it all seem more real and made me realize just how much I had learned, something I would not have realized without my involvement in this project. [Being able to discuss and use his knowledge makes "it all seem more real?"]

Protocol – Hermeneutic Reading

In his first narrative, Axel reinforces his feelings of connectivity as a distance learner. Although sensing involves perceiving, feeling, thinking, and knowing, Axel is not convinced that he has any "real" knowledge of his distance learning peers. His sense of knowing feels indefinite. He indicates this lack of reality by referring to the plane incident as "one of those

weird things." When the book surfaces, however, and the connection is actualized, then he is convinced that his sensed knowledge is real.

Further, the "chorus of ohs" incident reinforces Axel's "feeling that I knew these people." Axel introduces his second narrative as an account that deals with isolation and connection, but the narrated account focusses on how he defines his learning experience to be "real." Isolated, meaning placed or standing alone, is from the late Latin, *insulatus*, made into an island. Connection means joining or linking together. For his learning to be "real," Axel describes the need to link or connect the information and the techniques with practical experience. If knowledge is left on the island (unapplied knowledge) and not connected to the mainland (to be left alone and not transformed into applied knowledge), then the learning is not "real."

In his second narrative, Axel describes a feeling of isolation as a distance learner, and in his first narrative, he shares the affective and connected qualities of the distance learning experience. We must not assume that isolation is a negative element, an assumption drawn from our own presuppositions. Through the explication process, we come to understand *Axel*'s meaning for distance learning through *his* lived experience, not a meaning that can be applied to a general population. Axel mentions in his biography that he is "primarily an independent worker, preferring to work on my own", and that "distance courses tended to have clearer expectations, goals, etc." The conclusion, as Axel knows it, is that distance learning involves both connection and isolation elements. He feels a need to connect knowledge (gained through a partially isolated process) with applied experience, in order to complete his learning process (to make learning "real").

In both narratives, Axel describes isolation and connection, the constituent parts that relate to "real", which makes the experience whole. He moves from anonymity and isolation to connection and relatedness. In the first narrative, he relates with a person. Axel is independent and prefers to work alone; he considers isolation as part of the distance learning lifeworld. It is not until the plane incident that he fully realizes the existing relationships between distance learners. The "chorus of ohs" experience reinforces this same connectivity. In the second narrative, he connects his knowledge with practical experience. He relates how distance learning has been an isolated experience, and that it was not until he participated in the design project, that he was able to bring his knowledge to his consciousness.

In all of Axel's accounts, he describes a distance learning lived experience that involves isolation, but to his surprise, this lifeworld also involves connection and relatedness. The experience of being a distance learner has been one of unexpected realizations. Axel moves out of the isolation of his life as a distance learner into a world of connections and relationships, in the first case with another student, and in the second, with knowledge of his newly developed expertise.

Axel describes his distance learning lifeworld as one that involves a balance between isolation and connection, and describes two experiences as connecting forces: (a) relating to people and (b) application of knowledge or the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge. The connections are what make distance learning *real* for Axel. The concept of "real", as described by Axel, means having your knowledge recognized and shared, as well as incorporating knowledge into a usable, relevant, and purposeful state. "Real" also means relating to people, sharing a common experience.

Axel – Conversations

(Italics indicate Axel's input; regular print is Simonne's, underline is for emphasis)

Distance learning has a different sense of time. There is built-in reflection time. What I find doing distance ed., partially because, for me, it's been a lot better design (than the classroom mode), that I get a lot deeper processing of issues in the courses because I really focus. It is so independent. Hmmm, it sits with me a lot more. It allows it to percolate. This is partially because the materials are self-contained. You need to consider what you think and what you feel about the issues and the whole agenda, of the course. And in Distance Ed., the writer doesn't get, in the same way, to dominate the thought. Do you see what I mean? Like when you are in a face-to-face class, the teacher, hmm – will, in some way, dominate the thought. They may try to foster thought in other people and all that, but just by their very presence, they'll have a significant impact on the thinking of their students - what direction it takes, and that sort of thing.

Because of their physical presence - *yeah* - their physical presence in itself makes you feel that they dominate. *Yeah. It doesn't mean that it's an overall thing, but it does have significant influence.*

Because it's distance, the instructional design has to be very effective because people can look at it and say, "you know, this is crap." They can't get away with the stuff they do face-to-face, and what you end up with is a lot higher quality instruction on one level. And also, it gives you a large amount of the responsibility for your own learning in a way that face-to-face doesn't usually. In distance ed., because it's a more consumer-based model, they have to address that need (quality instruction and learning). For two reasons: the

curriculum is out in public; you can't hide bad teaching. It's high quality instruction that makes you think. And it's independent learning to a large extent.

Distance ed. has allowed me to soak up what they were offering, and see how I see it applying in my life and how I see it applying professionally, privately, whatever. It's allowed it to have a lot broader spectrum.

[I paraphrased at this point, summarizing what Axel described as the reflective components: pacing, the format that encourages independence and self-responsibility, the quality of the materials, the fact that there is not the physical presence of an instructor. I've caught this description?] *Yes, yes, yep.*

What you are describing is not just your sense of time as experienced in your distance learning lifeworld. You are also describing the format, the space. Your distance learning experience is not confined to the room over there (pointing to the computer room). Your distance learning is all over. *Mm-hmm, yes, yeah, yeah.* Because you're applying it all over, you said. *Yes, yeah.* This space then is everywhere? *Yes, the more distance learning I've done, the broader the circle has become. <u>It has helped to build a worldview in me in terms of education</u>* [underlined to show the emphasis that Axel gave to the statement]. *It has been <u>incredibly</u> empowering to do distance learning, via distance ed., because <u>I've done it</u>. I don't get the sense that the university did it, that any particular professor* - you're talking ownership here. *Yes, yes.* You own your learning because you have been responsible for it. *Yes.* You are describing that <u>you</u> are responsible for your own learning. *Mm-hmm.* And you own that; you guide it, and you direct it. *And that's a confidence-building thing in a much broader sense then dealing with just getting a master's program or whatever. To some degree, I really see it as a transformational experience.*

[The conversation at this point led to two narratives that, for Axel, described the transformational experience.]

1. One day this summer, I had a friend come, who is working on his Ph.D. He was shopping around for a job. I introduced him to the assistant superintendent. The three of us went out for lunch, and we started talking about education, where we saw education going, and where I saw the district going. When I walked out of that lunch, it struck me. Man, I've learnt a lot. That was part of it. And not only because I held my own in that discussion, but I was able to bring up points that neither of them had thought of, and could have an influence on what the district was going to do. So it was that; it was the confirming of knowledge, but also it was, "I can't believe I was just in a conversation like that." And it isn't the knowledge base; it isn't saying that I didn't have the knowledge to talk about that before. It was that I had been transformed where I would talk about things like that, that I would have the confidence. You're describing a change in you as a person, your personality. *Yes, it's given me the confidence, and to some degree the skills, the two working together. That's one example of the impact of the distance learning.*

Another example of the same sort of thing, in a way: I went to a conference in Western Canada. I went to hear a presentation by Dr. Loder from the eastern seaboard. She was teaching via distance learning methods, and she talked about the challenges she'd overcome, and the challenges that she hadn't. And she wasn't sure what to do about some of these things, and so, after she'd made her presentation, it sort of turned into a question and answer session. In the past, I would have had the nerve to ask questions, but not really make points, I don't think. And so, I said "Have you thought about this?" What it turned into for about ten minutes, was her asking <u>me</u> questions, because I was able to rattle off, "here's the

problem she's got, okay, have you tried this? And this? And this?" That was a demonstration for me of what I've learned, but also it very much became a demonstration of what I'd become. Halfway through the conversation, it's like stepping out of yourself, and going "who the hell is that?"

[Axel also reminded me of the second narrative from the protocol writings, and how all these experiences reinforce the transformation that he feels has really happened because his having ownership and responsibility of his own learning. He reiterated that being a distance learner has meant not only the development of skills, but also the building of confidence.]

You have used the word apply a lot in both the protocol writings and the conversations as part of your descriptions. Let's not get into "why" you use the word, because we only want to deal with the fact that you use this word to describe a situation as it is lived. By apply, are you describing that you are using the knowledge? *Yes, that's right; I needed to use it.*

In your second narrative, you are describing a connection between application and knowledge. *Mm-hmm.* In your first narrative, you describe a connection between a person and your learning. *Yes, that's another whole realm that has been fascinating to me, and also been - it's felt strange; it's felt strange. It's not really a disjuncture, but it's funny. I sort of had a sense of people, but in very narrow pieces; it was like narrow strips of a picture. It wasn't the whole picture. You know?* By sense, you mean? *A sense of their personality, of their views, of their style of discourse, not really a real feeling. It's funny. I would sort of get a sense of- was the person really edgy or not, were they a fairly wholistic person, were they the narrow driven type A, but only in certain spectrums? It wasn't just academically, you know, how they approach things academically, but do they respond at all when*

somebody says, 'it's snowing in Middlebench' or that sort of thing, or are they really narrow in focus? It's funny. I didn't gain any sense of their broader personality, or their essence. You'd only get little glimpses of it. The commonality of experience seemed a very limited connection. Going through the program is sort of, in some ways, like running a marathon in my head. It's like running ninety per cent of a race, and never looking at the people beside you, almost. You can sort of hear them, but never really looking at them, and then getting there, and being able to talk to them, and realizing the commonality of experience, how broad it was. It's sort of the adjunct position of the two [talking about isolation and connection]. *There were connections, but until I went to meet people face-to-face, I didn't know how isolating it was. There was a whole rich diversity and wonder in a lot of the people that were there. Because people feel constrained (this is an academic course) and because a lot of people are really time-pressured (they're working, taking courses, raising children, doing all this kind of stuff), they didn't have time for the relationship-building. You know, or not as much time. Hmmm. This is talking about isolation of the learner, in a way.*

So you're describing a lived space that is everywhere, but at the same time, you're describing a lived space that has its limitations. *Mm-hmm.* You're describing isolation, *mm-hmm, but with connections.* And then you're describing a connection that made you realize how isolated it was – *yeah* - that you didn't realize before. *It's sort of recursive.* It's going around and around: the connections, the isolation, the connections, the isolation. *Yeah.* And you're not too sure which one started, and where it ends, or maybe it doesn't end. *Yeah.* Maybe you're describing a circle. *Yep. And I mean, the connections, it's amazing that...* [Axel recalled the protocol describing the plane incident.] *That was amazing. I knew him and I'd never met him. It was just his conversational style (talking to the person, getting on*

the plane) twigged something in the back of my head, you know, hmm. And so it's like there are more connections there than you necessarily realize, and less isolation there than you thought. In a way, it would have been good to meet a bunch of people in the beginning, and in a way, not, because when you see people, and talk to them and stuff, your biases may start to come through.

Expanded Reading Including Consultation with Axel:

You have revisited the issues of application, connections, and isolation, but mainly, what you have talked about is transformation. *Yes, yeah.* And what seems to be the most important, the most encompassing feeling of your whole experience is the transformation. *Very much so.* And the lived experience of being a distance learner for you has been a transformational experience. *Mm-hmm.* And continues to be a transformational experience. *And yeah, it's like a snowball rolling downhill.*

Let's go back to your first narrative in the protocol writings where you describe how the connection between you and other distance learners became real. *Yes.* There's where you first describe how "real" happened. *Mm-hmm.* In the second narrative, you are trying to figure out how your learning becomes "real" and what "real" is. It seems that by applying your knowledge, by connecting knowledge with application of knowledge, you are better able to define how knowledge is "real." There seem to be other things here as well. *Part of it is application. I needed to see it in action. I needed to see the result of my learning in action. It seemed that it was learning in isolation. In some ways, it felt like an abstract process, because it doesn't directly relate to my daily work.* Making your experiences as you go along, rather than drawing on past experiences. *Yes, exactly. It meant that I didn't have a lot*

of places where I could hang concepts. To a degree, you could do that through people's postings in the computer conferencing. Sharing that happens in computer conferencing is an asset on a couple of levels, (a) the sharing of wisdom, and (b) the sharing of experience, the scaffolding of learning. Very much, I had to build my own scaffold. That's part of the isolation as well. It didn't make me uncomfortable, because, as I've said before, I'm sort of an independent learner. But it took extra effort, and what that meant is when you had an opportunity to make it real, to apply it (and those two don't mean exactly the same thing for me), but, mmm, there was the gleeful moment: "Oh, this goes here." It went from the realm of possibility and abstract thought to actual sets of circumstances you could apply it to. And it also really concretized the really intuitive feelings I had about my development. Because once again, in the isolation, you're changing, but you don't have the mirror as much to hold it up to. Or the mirrors don't show it too clearly. In a way, it's social, and in a way, it's a broader cognitive framework. It's sort of like comparing theoretical physics to applied engineering.

Maybe something that might have been missing in your distance learning experience is being recognized for something you've learned, the sharing of what you've learned. *Mm-hmm. Although we do share through CMC* (computer mediated communications), *all the moderators are different. As well, for some of the students, this is their first experience with the field of distance education, and they do not have past experiences to draw from. At the same time, students possibly miss recognition for knowledge learned and/or knowledge applied. It's almost like a gossip room. Even people who are remarkably busy, when they find somebody who is going through a parallel experience, want to share, if only to share the difficulty of the experience. Here I am typing this post on the computer conference, and I've*

got my child sitting on my lap with a cold. It's that human element. And it can be easily facilitated with CMC. It was fascinating for me how some people would really blossom with that, with little things. I remember how in one course, about two-thirds of the people would sign off sharing the weather with each other. That was just a little piece of what it gave you, a wider perspective of humanity, people putting their personality into it. It's funny the information things you can pick up out of little things like that. And that would depend on the moderator. *Very much so.* The moderator has to have the skills to know where the balance is in order to not allow the "chat" to dominate and become irritable for participants, but to promote a more personable, warmer atmosphere. *Yeah, to keep that fine line, and to know when to create a whole new conference just for people to talk, or to make it meaningful by talking.* So by "real" then, you mean applied, *mm-hmm,* you also mean interaction with people on a warmer, *mm-hmm,* basis – *yes* - and you mean having someone with the skills to provide that human element in the course. *Mm-hmm.* Those are the elements that, for you, define "real." *Because my personal philosophy of learning very much involves emotion.* Okay. *And the sense of an emotional learning community. I see myself as an analytical, independent learner on one level, and on another whole level, that is not true of me. There is a whole bunch of stuff that I don't feel that distance ed. is dealing with. I think it could; I don't think it would take a lot of effort, and I don't think it would take a lot of time. But I don't think that it does it.* "It" being the emotional part. *Yes, yes.* And that we have to look at that element a lot more. *Mm-hmm, yeah, yeah, I mean the glee of discovery, of finally getting how it all goes together, or even struggling with a particular author, concept, style, and using the computer conferences to say, "what the hell is he talking about on page*

seventeen?" Feeling the freedom to do that! Getting the emotions out as well as all the intellectual stuff. *Yeah.*

[As an introduction to his protocol writings, Axel expressed uncertainty as to whether the second narrative was a distance learning experience or not. In my introductory comment of the protocol expanded readings, I commented about his introduction. We discussed his uncertainty.] *After I had written it, the same thing struck me. It's interesting; what it made me think about was "where do you draw the line between distance education and other learning models; where is the edge of distance education?"* On the same note, you talk about the plane incident and then about the chorus of "ohs." *Mm-hmm.* [We reviewed my interpretation, which spoke of the human elements, the knowing each other, the established relationships, the joining together, and the unity.] You've mentioned this as well. *Yeah, very much so.* Later on in the first narrative, you say that all this brought up curious feelings of isolation and connection. As you see in the expanded readings, I wonder why you use the word "curious." I thought maybe it relates to the fact that you want to expand your horizons, so you're curious because you see something here happening –isolation/connection- and you want to know more about it. *Mm-hmm.* That's just part of who you are as a person; you like to expand your horizons; you like to go further with something, and you're wondering about this now because writing this has brought this up in your head. And in relation to that, how do you relate isolation and connection? And I don't know if you know the answer. We talked about it earlier, how they are totally interactive. *When I say curious, it's a combination of fascinating and odd.* You mentioned "weird" before. *Yes.* And "strange" and "funny" when we were talking. *Yeah, uh, it was a new experience. They talk about the isolation of a distance learner, and I felt isolated, but not a lot, but after that (meeting peers*

at a workshop), I felt more isolated, because I wanted the higher level of connectivity. You knew the isolation was there, but it's when you connected with people face-to-face that you realized even more that the isolation was there. *Yep, yeah.* You feel that distance learning needs more connections between people, more opportunity to relate with others. *Mm-hmm.* And that relates back to your comment earlier about bringing more emotion into distance learning, *mm-hmm,* through more effective CMC, for instance. *Yes.*

[Regarding the second protocol narrative, we reviewed my questions about Axel's definition of "real." We recalled that he has already clarified that application and relevancy are the important elements, not the face-to-face interaction, but that, in his case, the applied experience was face-to-face.] *Yes, exactly. I don't think that it needed to be face-to-face to make it "real" for me. I needed to apply it. I needed to be able to see how it would all fit together as a coherent whole and interact with an environment. It was the application, and it was the increased interactivity that the face-to-face brought, but it doesn't have to be face-to-face, but what is important is the higher level of interactivity.*

[We reviewed the hermeneutic reading for the protocol writing.] *Yes, it's true. Both instances, face-to-face brought to the surface intuitions that I had, feelings I had, that I had not really sat down and analyzed. But even if I had, some of them are not prone to analysis.* They are at a feeling level. *Yes, very much so. It felt strange; it felt, not bad, but it felt unusual, in that, having a sense of people you've never met really, and having interactions. It's almost like you got a sense of their character that bled through the academic work they were doing.*

[Axel and I dialogued about the key role the conference moderator plays in setting up a warm and inviting environment that promotes dialogue, rather than killing any sense of

sharing valued experiences and knowledge. The type of question, the way discussion is presented, the manner in which a moderator is present within the conference, are all issues in expanding the opportunities to learn, rather than breaking or losing these opportunities.]

[Regarding Axel's interpretation of the issues of anonymity, isolation, connectivity, and unexpected realizations, he says that distance learning has been a lot broader experience then he thought it would be.] *My conception at first was very much that it would be like doing the isolated distance courses I'd done before this program. And that one of the things that makes a difference is the inclusion of computer conferencing, but another thing that makes a difference is the idea of cohort, that you're going through with a group of people. That allows for the possibility of building community, even if it is in a limited sense.*

[As we dialogued, two aspects were shared about the issue of building community. One, students choose to ignore the opportunities of student fellowship and peer relationship that are embedded within the distance learning system. Second, the distance learning system could encourage and facilitate an environment that discourages anonymity and isolation.]

[Next, we reviewed together the issue of recognition, the opportunity to demonstrate and share knowledge.] *I think the recognition is important because it –part of it is ego-stroking, but part of it acts as a mirror for practice. You need it to some degree to validate what you're doing, but also to some degree, to put it in a context. You can help to build a commonality of purpose between learners.*

The word connection has a material element; you can connect with something. *Mm-hmm.* Relating means there is a human element; you relate with someone. *Mm-hmm.* When we talk of isolation and connection, I'm wondering if you mean both, that is, connecting with material elements as well as relatedness, relating with people, interacting

with people. *More relatedness.* Is this going back to your idea of emotion in learning? *It's being able to get an empathic sense of people, who they are. To me, it's made up of many details. You don't have to be face-to-face to really get it. It's an accumulation of details about people, little nuances. That's what connectiveness is to me. It can happen very quickly; I think it's intuitive. It isn't sitting down and playing twenty questions. It's talking with somebody, almost about anything, where they feel comfortable to really be themselves. They don't feel constrained by a medium, or having to display a mastery of content, or whatever.* It's establishing a comfort zone. *Yes, yes.*

[Axel added from a reflective viewpoint.] I find it interesting, thinking about it since, the need for some sort of connectivity, that I wasn't aware of, in myself. I'm well aware of it in the rest of my life, but I manage it. I didn't feel the same ability to manage it, the level of connectivity. I felt externally constrained. So that led to a low level discomfort on my part, but it led to a real sense of glee in the face-to-face encounters, like the plane incident. I'd like to go over that with you. You're saying that there was this isolation, *mm-hmm,* and you felt that the connection was not under your control because it was abstract or via distance. You now realize the need to have more connectivity and that through this lived experience as a distance learner, you discovered that this connectiveness was there after all. It was externally constrained, that the way courses were constructed, the way computer conferencing was constructed and run, constrained that interactivity and connectivity. This is where you feel distance learning can be more effective. *Yeah.* The educators. *Yes, definitely. Not necessarily demanding everybody do a wider spectrum of things, but offering a wider spectrum.* Okay, so those who choose to, can. *Yes.*

[Axel continued to review the conversations.] *I don't have to deal with the ego of an instructor by doing this by distance. Maybe a little bit, but it's not the same. There is the physical distance, but also the reflective time and the nature of the medium is empowering. No one interrupts you when you're on there* [meaning CMC]; *you have time to think about what you want to say. There's times I wish I could take off what I said* [laugh]. *But none of those are really present in the classroom.* Dealing with the instructor's ego and the reflective time? *That's right.* And you don't feel you need to deal with the professor's ego? *No.* It doesn't come through. *No, it doesn't. Because when they're* [distance learning authors] *writing course materials, they're writing them for you* [the learner]. *Whereas, when*

a professor is in front of a classroom, he isn't necessarily teaching for you, I don't think, necessarily. It could be his own agenda; it could be – because it isn't examined. There isn't somebody in the back of the class saying that's a biased view of this whole portion of history or whatever. It's not exposed to scrutiny; it isn't going to be documented. *Yeaaah.* This is where you bring in the whole idea of instructional design and how effective it must be because it's right there for everybody to examine. A designer or instructor knows that if the content or presentation is inadequate, that inadequacy is visible to anyone; it is not hidden behind classroom doors. *Mm-hmm, yeah.* This relates back to your point about the consumer-based model. The author, designer, instructor have to address the fact that distance learners accept some self-responsibility for their learning process, that there is this independent component (*mm-hmm*). Is that correct? *Yes, yes.* So you've given two reasons for distance learning materials to be better designed: public curriculum and independent learning. *Yeah.*

Do you remember when we talked about your distance learning time, you also described your distance learning space and its format. You showed me your room as a distance learner, but it became obvious that your distance learning "room" is actually everywhere. *Yes, yeah, yeah.* You described your space as a distance learner as everywhere. *Yes, yes.* You said that the more distance learning you've done, the broader the circle has become, and you've repeated this description and feeling. Several times, you have associated your distance learning experience with other facets of your life, and have also said that "it has helped to build a world view in me in terms of education." Can you reflect on this and add an interpretative quality to your description? You're not talking about distance learning as an option based only as a geographical alternative – *no, I'm talking about quality of delivery,*

freedom and constraints in delivery of education. It really made me question significantly the prevalent educational model, especially for post-secondary education. I can work anywhere. It's limitless. *Mm-hmm, it's not tied to a particular time and place, and I got that sense, but I got the sense of it being a lot broader than that.* Is this where you described how incredibly empowering it has been for you to do distance learning via a distance education format because you've done it? This is where you described the transformational element. You described a feeling of ownership for your own learning. You described a deep sense of responsibility for your learning process. You own it; you guide it; you direct it, therefore you have so much more – *there's more value to it* – value to it - *and it builds in a person, if they are successful at it, capabilities that are a lot broader. You don't have the same external supports; you have to reach within yourself to do it.* That's where you've gone for it, within? *Yes, exactly, and it makes it a lot more valid.* You realize more potential for yourself. That's when you shared the narratives about the Ph.D. friend, the conference where you had discussion with the presenter from the eastern seaboard, and your second protocol narrative. This feeling of ownership and this experience of being responsible for your learning – both of these have led to the transformation that you have attributed to your distance learning experience. The personal transformation that you describe is due to the increased level of confidence you now enjoy and to the skills you have developed.

[From the point where Axel shares his transformational experience, he lets go any further descriptions about isolation and connection. All feelings and descriptions seem to come together in the word transformation. Axel interpreted the movement of his descriptions in the same way.] *Even the isolation led to the transformation – getting over the hurdles makes you stronger. There is isolation, then empowerment – abstract, then you apply it. It's keeps*

going around and around. All that you have described as part of your lived experience as a distance learner is not stagnant, it keeps moving. *Very much so. For me, it needs to be an iterative process. You can't allow yourself to get stuck. There are the negative moments and the gleeful moments.* [Axel and I explored the gleeful moments as he joyfully shared the intellectual and emotional gleeful times of his experience as a distance learner. The narratives focussed on outcomes from CMC experiences, some of which were intellectually stimulating, and some of which connected him strongly with peers through their struggles and through their humorous events. In addition, we dialogued about the wonder of intelligent and stimulating course and program development.]

[I was able to ask Axel's wife if she could share anything regarding Axel's experience as a distance learner. Mae always thought of Axel as incredibly intelligent. She could see he was happy in his work, but he also needed more intellectual stimulation. Due to the accessibility of learning through distance learning, Axel is able to pursue higher learning through a challenging program and this, Mae says, has meant and means opportunity, hope, and stimulation for Axel. Because of the distance learning format, Axel has been able to marry two interests, the online work and the learning. This marriage of interests within his lived experience as distance learner, has given Axel a chance for personal growth and development beyond his expectations. Further, Mae adds that to be a distance learner has meant living an experience that built up Axel's confidence level and self-esteem.]

Hermeneutic Reading

What are the essential components of the distance learning world as they apply to Axel's lived experience? What does it mean to Axel to be a distance learner?

To Axel, distance learning means learning with reflection time. It means being an independent learner, with struggles, but with opportunities for self-responsibility that empower the learner. Being a distance learner for Axel means an experience that builds confidence and self-esteem; it is a lifeworld that inspires opportunity, hope, personal growth and development. The distance learning lifeworld contains elements of both isolation and connections. Axel believes the distance learning world expands his world, as well as his worldview of education. Distance learning frees the learning lifeworld to explore limitless possibilities. What are the essential components that are part of these possibilities to Axel, according to his lived experience? They are quality control, accessibility, personal growth and development, and self-awareness. Primarily, Axel believes that being a distance learner means living a transformational experience.

CHAPTER SIX

MEG - "AND THEN SOME..."

Leading Up to Meg's Narratives

Similar to Louise and Axel, Meg studied the orientation material, sent her biography, and e-mailed her protocol writing. I did the expanded and hermeneutic readings with the protocol, and consulted with my supervisor regarding my interpretations. We were ready for the conversational proce s. I scheduled a meeting time with Meg. Thursday arrived, and I drove through fog and blowing snow to get to Meg's. The roads had been well cleared, however, and there had been absolutely no stress with the trip. After a restful night, I headed out early the next day to find Meg's workplace. Outside, the heavy rain poured, and the strong winds blew. Inside her private office, Meg opened the windows, and let the fresh air from the rain and winds enter the room. The tape recorder started running and the conversation began easily. After my time with Meg, I treated myself to some exercise, and came home eager to work on the data.

Meg - Protocol Writing

As mentioned in my biography, I returned to university studies 15 years after a disastrous first year when I was 18. Convinced that my family was right, and I was indeed stupid, (after all, I had just flunked out), I literally fled the university environment and went to community college. In spite of earning a 4.0 average there, and being told by one instructor after another that I belonged in university, I was afraid to go back. What if I failed again? However, I very much wanted a university degree.

I finally summoned up the courage to go back a few years after moving to B.C., where my community college credits would be recognized by Open university, an open and dist. education [distance education] institution. I enrolled in the Bachelor of Administrative Studies Program. The first course I needed to take was English; the first assignment was a short diagnostic exam to determine if I had the skills necessary for writing at the university level.

I recall that I was absolutely terrified of writing this thing. I remember my hands shaking as I filled out the form that went with the assignment, and dropped it in the mailbox. And waited, feeling like I was awaiting the verdict from the jury. What remains vivid in my mind is receiving this assignment back. The envelope arrived, and I tentatively opened it with equal parts of fear and anticipation. How did I do? What would the comments be? What if it was no good? I recall thinking that if it were the latter, I would drop out of the program rather than face the prospect of academic humiliation again.

I recall the comments to this day. "This is undoubtedly the best paper on this subject I have ever received." The tutor was in his 60's; this was high praise indeed. "You obviously will have no problem with this or any other course. Good luck with your studies."

My heart leapt; it still does as I recall those words. It was proof, in writing, from a real professor, that I wasn't stupid after all. That I had what it took to be a university graduate. I was ecstatic; on cloud nine. I felt my confidence go up like it was boosted by a charger. And I immediately had the courage and the tenacity to finish my degree...and then some.

Protocol - Expanded Reading

[Italics indicate Meg's input; regular print is the author's; underlining is for emphasis]

As mentioned in my biography, I returned to university studies 15 years after a disastrous first year when I was 18. Convinced that my family was right, and I was indeed stupid, (after all, I had just flunked out), I literally fled the university environment and went to community college. In spite of earning a 4.0 average there, and being told by one instructor after another that I belonged in university, I was afraid to go back. What if I failed again? However, I very much wanted a university degree. [Meg sets the scene. She uses strong vocabulary to begin her description by recalling the "disastrous" past. She recollects the feelings associated with having been called "stupid" and having "flunked out." Meg tells us about her fifteen-year wait during which she lives in disbelief of her own worthiness, in fear, and with a persistent desire for a degree.]

I finally summoned up the courage to go back a few years after moving to Brado (pseudonym), where my community college credits would be recognized by The Open University, an open and distance education institution. I enrolled in the Bachelor of Administrative Studies. The first course I needed to take was English; the first assignment was a short diagnostic exam to determine if I had the skills necessary for writing at the university level. [Meg describes the assignment. She takes the first step to conquer her fear and move toward her aspiration. Why does she choose a distance education format? Is it difficult to step into the physical environment of a traditional campus? Earlier she mentions she "literally fled the university environment." Is there a feeling of anonymity with distance learning? Does she feel safer in the distance learning environment? In order to avoid the possibility of further public humiliation, does she feel distance learning offers more options with regard to anonymous continuation or withdrawal from the studies?]

I recall that I was absolutely terrified of writing this thing [sounds like a monster]. *I remember my hands shaking as I filled out the form that went with the assignment, and dropped it in the mailbox. And waited* [onerous], *feeling like I was awaiting the verdict from the jury* [scary, stressful]. *What remains vivid in my mind is receiving this assignment back.* ["This thing" is now an assignment again.] *The envelope arrived* [anticipatory feeling, like at the Oscars], *and I tentatively opened it with equal parts of fear and anticipation. How did I do? What would the comments be? What if it was no good? I recall thinking that if it were the latter, I would drop out of the program rather than face the prospect of academic humiliation again.* [It is part of the essence of distance learning that students have the freedom to retain their anonymity and their privacy.]

I recall the comments to this day. "This is undoubtedly the best paper on this subject I have ever received." The tutor was in his 60's,; this was high praise indeed. "You obviously will have no problem with this or any other course. Good luck with your studies." [Meg can quote. How long ago was this?]

My heart leapt; it still does as I recall those words. It was proof, in writing, from a real [can Meg define "real" as she uses it here?] *professor, that I wasn't stupid after all.* [Why does it take "this" to prove she's not stupid?] *That I had what it took* [what does it take?] *to be a university graduate. I was ecstatic; on cloud nine. I felt my confidence go up like it was boosted by a charger. And I immediately had the courage and the tenacity to finish my degree...and then some* [as if Meg is saying, "if you knew the whole story, then you would really see how far I have come"]. [In her narrative, Meg moves from fear, to courage mixed with apprehension, and then to lasting courage accompanied with confidence and a strong feeling of self-esteem. She has experienced a transformation.]

Protocol - Hermeneutic Reading

As I read and study Meg's narrative, I wonder what it is about distance learning that makes this experience a unique distance learning event. What is the essence of distance learning that inspires Meg to recount this narrative as one that describes for her the meaning of being a distance learner? Meg has definitely aroused my curiosity with the phenomenological part of her role as co-researcher. I am eager to enter the hermeneutic process with her. We have yet to discover if Meg's experience is unique to the distance learning lifeworld. Only Meg can further enlighten us in this regard. In consultation with Meg, I look forward to seeing whether it is the essence of distance learning that prompted her to choose a distance education system to further her studies. As a reader, you are likely eager, as I am, to share more time with Meg, and delve further into her lived experiences. Before we enter into the consultative hermeneutic process with Meg and gain her interpretive insights as she reflects on her narrative, we remain in the descriptive mode by listening to more about her distance learning lifeworld through phenomenological conversations. We do not want to change gears from description to reflection and interpretation too early. As with Louise and Axel, I allowed the co-researchers to stay in the descriptive mode, rather than fast-forwarding and reversing between description and interpretation.

After the phenomenological conversations, we will consult with Meg, and discover if her protocol writing tells about a lived experience unique to the distance learning lifeworld. Meg can validate whether being a distance learner for her means participation in a world that facilitates confidence building, the development of positive self-esteem, and whether being a distance learner means an experience of transformation.

Meg - Conversations

[Italics indicate Meg's input; regular print is the author's; underlining is for emphasis]

In my undergraduate program, I found the faculty extremely supportive. I would often have marvelous conversations, and felt that a real uniqueness of that kind of distance learning was that interaction with faculty, which you would never have if you were one of three hundred people in a first year undergraduate class at B.U. (pseudonym). Yet, in English, I could pick up the phone and talk to the tutor, and we could discuss the play that was the required reading, for an hour. This would never happen in an undergraduate program on campus. But I think I got a real feel, or a much better sense of what it meant to be part of a learning community when I went into the master's program, because of the computer conferencing. Now what was interesting is that, at the same time, as you know, I was in a face-to-face master's program. And loving it – why did I wait so long to go back to school, and it was great to be here and have the interaction with people. <u>But,</u> and I guess here if I'm looking for that light bulb experience - was realizing one day, probably on my third or fourth distance learning master's course, which included computer conferencing, that I was having far more intentional discussions around course content and issues that we were studying in my distance ed., then I was in my face-to-face graduate program. You really had to work hard to get a group together face-to-face, because people are commuting, or they have jobs or family, or there are six hundred other things going on here that are part of the educational experience, but not directly related to what you are studying. It was impossible to get people together to talk about a book we were reading in a particular class, for example.

Are you saying that in the face-to-face, it was maybe easy to get together socially, but it was not easy to get into intentional – *that's right* – discussions. *Distance Ed., because we are more forced to be intentional. You go into a conference, and it is much more focussed, although other things will come in. A light bulb moment came when I realized in e-mails back and forth to students in my face-to-face program, that what we had done was to create a conference, which was like a distance ed. conference. We were putting a distance learning component into a face-to-face program because that's what worked for us as adult learners. I then related this to my distance education courses. All of a sudden, the light bulb went on, and there was a real understanding of several things. First, I was part of a learning community in my distance learning experience, and yes, I had a sense of being part of a community in my face-to-face program, but in my distance ed. program, I felt very part of a learning community.* You are emphasizing the word "learning." *Learning community, yes, where you are using (I don't like the word using), but using your fellow students to help with your instruction and knowledge. Using in a positive sense, where we bound off one another and interact with one another.* The format facilitates the learning community, the development of a learning community. *Right. And format, not just in the sense of a computer conference, but in the sense that you can log on at two o'clock in the morning, or two o'clock in the afternoon. You can wait until the baby's down, or you can do it at a coffee break at your work. The distance education format, and to me the most important aspect, the asynchronous nature of distance learning, meant that I could be part of a learning community at a distance in a way that I could not be face-to-face. And a real piece of evidence for that was us unintentionally forming a distance learning community in my face-to-face program. That, for me, pointed out very powerfully, a couple of things. First, as a*

learner, that it was really necessary for my kind of learning style to have this kind of community, that I had so much richer an educational experience when I had that kind of community. Second, yes you can have just as good an education at a distance. You face the notion that distance ed. is second class. Yet here I was having a very first class educational experience at a distance.

It sounds to me as if you are describing two different lived time experiences. You are finishing the master's face-to-face and in the process of the master's through distance learning simultaneously, correct? *Right.* Your lived time with the face-to-face belongs at certain times, whereas your lived time with your distance learning experience is anytime. *Not so much anytime, but at a time of my choosing.* Okay. *As opposed to a time of someone else's choosing.* So it can be anytime because of the choice element. *Right. That's the biggest difference, choice, which works into student empowerment.* Okay, tell me more about that. How does lived time and choice work into student empowerment? *I have the option, as a learner, of choosing when and how I will learn. In my traditional program, administration puts out a timetable. I must be there at that time, and at that place.*

You seem to be getting into a description that tells of what the lived space is for you as a distance learner. *With distance education, learning occurs in life. For me, the learning is not so compartmentalized, that I learn Monday, from ten to twelve, when I have this class. Rather, in distance learning, you are always in the mode of learning. I asked an interesting question in one of the computer conferences a couple of weeks ago, a get to know you conference. As part of the debate on the values of various technologies, paper comes up very high, so I asked, "What's the most interesting place you have done your readings?" People say, "I take the readings in the car; when I'm waiting for the kids, I read; I read at work on*

lunch hour; when I'm on the night shift, I do my reading; anytime I have twenty minutes, like at a doctor's office; sitting here, sitting there." So the distance learning is happening all the time, everywhere. You think this is because of distance learning. *More so, more so, because of that choice element I mentioned before. You can choose when you are doing your learning, so it follows that you develop the mindset of choosing all the time.* You feel a flexible learning environment. *Somehow it seems to me that I'm more into connecting what's happening in life with what I'm learning. One feeds the other. You take back those life experiences and observations back into your learning, and that helps to form the knowledge base, which then goes back out into life, and around it goes. And I don't know, being a mature learner, how much of that is due to distance learning, and how much of that is due to not being twenty-five. The mature learner does bring something to study that the young adult does not have, in life experience. How much I am describing would be the same for a twenty-two year old, I don't know.* From your personal experience as a distance learner, distance learning encompasses your life; it is embedded in your whole life space. *Yeah, yeah, and another thing that I found different about distance learning, in comparison to being in the classroom. What happens in the classroom, you come in, you sit down in a desk, your professor comes out, stands on an elevated platform, behind a lectern, and talks to you. What happens in distance learning, it's more collaborative; the faculty are more involved in learning with you. In conferences, it wasn't uncommon for faculty to ask questions of people, because all kinds of people are in distance learning. That's another thing that I found different, a tremendously wide, rich diversity study by distance learning, because you don't have to be able to pick and move to a particular city, or be at a particular stage of life. Anybody can come. So you get this incredibly rich resource in your fellow classmates that I*

see faculty taking advantage of as I do, as another student, that I haven't seen as much of in the face-to-face program.

Sounds like you are describing an experience that has fewer boundaries. *That's probably true, and if we talk about lifelong learning, distance education can better facilitate that than the face-to-face learning. There are fewer boundaries. Now is the need to connect to the Internet a boundary? No more so than the ability to be able to be in a certain classroom, in a certain university, in a certain city, at a certain time, which is perhaps more of a boundary.* You are describing, for you, an experience with fewer boundaries. *Yes, absolutely, fewer boundaries which meant more choices, again, that student empowerment, more options, and more control of my own learning.*

Professors do not take any courses on how to teach. We have generation after generation of Ph.D.'s who are qualified to be content experts, but who don't have a frigging clue about course delivery. What I find in distance courses, I open them up, and there are the objectives; there are some of the resources; there are readings; there are conferences; there are professors; there are other students that I can use; there are on-line resources, and there is anything that I'm clever enough to come with as a resource; and I choose what works best for me. That's what you mean by control. *Yes. I can decide how I'm going to use the readings, what I'm going to use, and how much I participate in the conference. I can immediately be in a networking situation with people who can facilitate my learning or help me develop professionally.*

The choice element is a big part of my feelings of student empowerment. Also, you can't feel empowered if you're not feeling confident about what you're doing. And I have found that the faculty who work at a distance are willing to give up their power. They do not need

to be the all-knowing sage. I think it's an attitude they have that you are a competent learner. What is transmitted from them is the feeling of competence as a learner, which empowers you to take that responsibility as an adult learner. Am I hearing you describe a feeling of ownership for your learning in your experience as a distance learner? *Yeah, that would be a good description, ownership, right. And that carried over into my face-to-face program. I used to attribute taking responsibility for your learning to being a mature student. I was shocked to come to a face-to-face graduate program and still hear other adults who have chosen to be at graduate school (it's not like grade twelve where you have to be there) still asking, "what do I need to know for the test questions?", etc., as opposed to taking control over the learning, and asking "what do I want to learn? How do I want to learn it?" Again, I think, distance education fosters that because you are made to feel that you are competent as an adult learner, and you're trusted, the trust that you can be responsible for the learning.*

What I've heard you say so far is first, distance learning enables you to belong to a learning community. *Mm-hmm.* The word learning is emphasized because it is not just a community of people, it is a community focussed on intentional learning *(mm-hmm)*, with a richness embedded in the group *(mm-hmm)* because of the diversity of people participating *(mm-hmm)*, and because of the environment surrounding the distance learning experience. Besides describing the format and how that related to lived space, you also talked about your lived time. You shared that the element of choice fosters student empowerment, adding that the distance learning experience is embedded in your life. You also mentioned what effect distance learning had on you as a person. Distance learning has increased your confidence level, has made you feel competent *(mm-hmm)*, has encouraged you to be responsible for

your learning, and nurtured you to develop a sense of ownership for your learning. *Mm-hmm.* All of these qualities together have given you a feeling that you have become a learner. *Absolutely, and for me, that's come through being a distance learner. I thought if I can do this Canadian Economics course, at home, independently, then I feel empowered.*

You are saying that this happened to you as a distance learner, not because you simply chose to be a distance learner, but because the distance learning format itself facilitates these effects. *Mm-hmm. I think someone who goes into teaching because they want a roomful of adoring students is not going to choose to teach through distance education. So maybe, people who teach are pre-selected as those who have a less hierarchical notion of what it means to be the teacher. I love that saying, "guide on the side vs. sage on the stage." There is no stage in distance ed., and so to me, that helps to create the kind of environment where you do have guides on the side. Sometimes my guides in distance learning are faculty, professors, and sometimes, they are fellow students. I am in a conference right now where one of the students has become the expert in this particular segment of the conference, because her experience with this particular topic leads her to take that role. She probably won't be when we focus on another issue, but she is presently a resource to the group. The conference leader lets her do it, and why not? The instructor comes in at appropriate times, but does not seem to have any problem letting her be the expert that she is. I have not seen this happen in a regular classroom, even though, in the face-to-face class I'm in now has an average age of thirty nine, and we have people with career backgrounds that bring a lot of experience in their studies.* It still does not happen. *It does not happen nearly as much, no.* You think it is because of the instructor, and that people who are involved with distance learning – *yes the educators, but also the format. If the expert we mentioned above had to*

quit her job to come and study, she would have to leave behind her current present-day experience, which she presently shares with us.

Expanded Reading

[Italics indicate Meg's input; regular print is the author's; underlining is for emphasis]

In my undergraduate program, I found the faculty extremely supportive. I would often have marvelous conversations, and felt that a real uniqueness of that kind of distance learning was that interaction with faculty, which you would never have if you were one of three hundred people in a first year undergraduate class at B.U. Yet, in English, I could pick up the phone and talk to the tutor, and we could discuss the play that was the required reading, for an hour. This would never happen in an undergraduate program on campus. But I think I got a real feel, or a much better sense of what it meant to be part of a learning community when I went into the master's program, because of the computer conferencing. Now what was interesting is that, at the same time, as you know, I was in a face-to-face master's program. And loving it – why did wait so long to go back to school, and it was great to be here and have the interaction with people. But, and I guess here if I'm looking for that light bulb experience - was realizing one day, probably on my third or fourth distance learning master's course, which included computer conferencing, that I was having far more intentional discussions around course content and issues that we were studying in my distance ed., then I was in my face-to-face graduate program. You really had to work hard to get a group together face-to-face, because people are commuting, or they have jobs or family, or there are 600 hundred other things going on here that are part of the educational experience, but not directly related to what you are studying. It was impossible

to get people together to talk about a book we were reading in a particular class, for example.

Are you saying that in the face-to-face, it was maybe easy to get together socially, but it was not easy to get into intentional – *that's right* – discussions. *Distance Ed., because we are more forced to be intentional. You go into a conference, and it is much more focussed, although other things will come in. A light bulb moment came when I realized in e-mails back and forth to students in my face-to-face program, that what we had done was to create a conference, which was like a distance ed. conference. We were putting a distance learning component into a face-to-face program because that's what worked for us as adult learners. I then related this to my distance education courses. All of a sudden, the light bulb went on, and there was a real understanding of several things. First, I was part of a learning community in my distance learning experience, and yes, I had a sense of being part of a community in my face-to-face program, but in my distance ed. program, I felt very part of a learning community.* You are emphasizing the word "learning." *Learning community, yes, where you are using (I don't like the word using), but using your fellow students to help with your instruction and knowledge. Using in a positive sense, where we bound off one another and interact with one another.* The (distance learning) format facilitates the learning community, the development of a learning community. *Right. And format, not just in the sense of a computer conference, but in the sense that you can log on at two o'clock in the morning, or two o'clock in the afternoon. You can wait until the baby's down, or you can do at a coffee at your work. The distance education format, and to me the most important aspect, the asynchronous nature of distance learning, meant that I could be part of a learning community at a distance in a way that I could not be face-to-face. And a real piece*

of evidence for that was us unintentionally forming a distance learning community in my face-to-face program. That, for me, pointed out very powerfully, a couple of things. First, as a learner, that it was really necessary for my kind of learning style to have this kind of community, that I had so much richer an educational experience when I had that kind of community. Second, yes you can have just as good an education at a distance. You face the notion that distance ed. is second class. Yet here I was having a very first class educational experience at a distance.

It sounds to me as if you are describing two different lived time experiences. You are finishing the master's face-to-face and in the process of the master's through distance learning simultaneously, correct? *Right.* Your lived time with the face-to-face belongs at certain times, whereas your lived with your distance learning experience is anytime. Is that what you are saying? *Not so much anytime, but at a time of my choosing.* Okay. *As opposed to a time of someone else's choosing.* So it can be anytime because of the choice element. *Right. That's the biggest difference, choice, which works into student empowerment.* Okay, tell me more about that. How does lived time and choice work into student empowerment? *I have the option, as a learner, of choosing when and how I will learn. In my traditional program, administration puts out a timetable. I must be there at that time, and at that place.*

You seem to be getting into a description that tells of what the lived space is for you as a distance learner. *With distance education, learning occurs in life. For me, the learning is not so compartmentalized, that I learn Monday, from ten to twelve, when I have this class. Rather, in distance learning, you are always in the mode of learning. I asked an interesting question in one of the computer conferences a couple of weeks ago, a "get to know you" conference. As part of the debate on the values of various technologies, paper comes up very*

high, so I asked, "What's the most interesting place you have done your readings?" People say, "I take the readings in the car; when I'm waiting for the kids, I read; I read at work on lunch hour; when I'm on the night shift, I do my reading; anytime I have twenty minutes, like at a doctor's office; sitting here, sitting there." So the distance learning is happening all the time, everywhere. You think this is because of distance learning. *More so, more so, because of that choice element I mentioned before. You can choose when you are doing your learning, so it follows that you develop the mindset of choosing all the time.* You feel a flexible learning environment. *Somehow it seems to me that I'm more into connecting what's happening in life with what I'm learning. One feeds the other. You take back those life experiences and observations back into your learning, and that helps to form the knowledge base, which then goes back out into life, and around it goes. And I don't know, being a mature learner, how much of that is due to distance learning, and how much of that id due to not being twenty-five. The mature learner does bring something to study that the young adult does not have, in life experience. How much I am describing would be the same for a twenty-two year old, I don't know.* From your personal experience as a distance learner, distance learning encompasses your life; it is embedded in your whole life space. *Yeah, yeah, and another thing that I found different about distance learning, in comparison to being in the classroom. What happens in the classroom, you come in, you sit down in a desk, your professor comes out, stands on an elevated platform, behind a lectern, and talks to you. What happens in distance learning, it's more collaborative; the faculty is more involved in learning with you. In conferences, it wasn't uncommon for faculty to ask questions of people, because all kinds of people are in distance learning. That's another thing that I found different, a tremendously wide, rich diversity (of) study (opportunities) by distance learning,*

because you don't have to be able to pick and move to a particular city, or be at a particular stage of life. Anybody can come. So you get this incredibly rich resource in your fellow classmates that I see faculty taking advantage of as I do, as another student, that I haven't seen as much of in the face-to-face program.

Sounds like you are describing an experience that has fewer boundaries. *That's probably true, and if we talk about lifelong learning, distance education can better facilitate that than the face-to-face learning. There are fewer boundaries. Now does the need to connect to the Internet a boundary? No more so than the ability to be able to be in a certain classroom, in a certain university, in a certain city, at a certain time, which is perhaps more of a boundary.* You are describing, for you, an experience with fewer boundaries. *Yes, absolutely, fewer boundaries which meant more choices, again, that student empowerment, more options, and more control of my own learning.*

Professors do not take any courses on how to teach. We have generation after generation of Ph.D.'s who are qualified to be content experts, but who don't have a frigging clue about course delivery. What I find in distance courses, I open them up, and there are the objectives; there are some of the resources; there are readings; there are conferences; there are professors; there are other students that I can use; there are on-line resources, and there is anything that I'm clever enough to come with as a resource; and I choose what works best for me. That's what you mean by control. *Yes. I can decide how I'm going to use the readings, what I'm going to use, and how much I participate in the conference. I can immediately be in a networking situation with people who can facilitate my learning or help me develop professionally.*

The choice element is a big part of my feelings of student empowerment. Also, you can't feel empowered if you're not feeling confident about what you're doing. And I have found that the faculty who work at a distance are willing to give up their power. They do not need to be the all-knowing sage. I think it's an attitude they have that you are a competent learner. What is transmitted from them is the feeling of competence as a learner, which empowers you to take that responsibility as an adult learner. Am I hearing you describe a feeling of ownership for your learning in your experience as a distance learner? *Yeah, that would be a good description, ownership, right. And that carried over into my face-to-face program. I used to attribute taking responsibility for your learning to being a mature student. I was shocked to come to a face-to-face graduate program and still hear other adults who have chosen to be at graduate school (it's not like grade twelve where you have to be there) still asking, "what do I need to know for the test questions?", etc., as opposed to taking control over the learning, and asking "what do I want to learn? How do I want to learn it?" Again, I think, distance education fosters that because you are made to feel that you are competent as an adult learner, and you're trusted, the trust that you can be responsible for the learning.*

What I've heard you say so far is first, distance learning enables you to belong to a learning community. *Mm-hmm.* The word learning is emphasized because it is not just a community of people, it is a community focussed on intentional learning *(mm-hmm)*, with a richness embedded in the group *(mm-hmm)* because of the diversity of people participating *(mm-hmm)*, and because of the environment surrounding the distance learning experience. Besides describing the format (that facilitates an enriched, focussed, and lifelong learning environment) and how that related to lived space (everywhere), you also talked about your

lived time (anytime). You shared that the element of choice fosters student empowerment, adding that the distance learning experience is embedded in your life. You also mentioned what affect distance learning has had on you as a person. Distance learning has increased your confidence level, has made you feel competent *(mm-hmm)*, has encouraged you to be responsible for your learning, and nurtured you to develop a sense of ownership for your learning. *Mm-hmm.* All of these qualities together have given you a feeling that you have become a learner. *Absolutely, and for me, that's come through being a distance learner. I thought if I can do this Canadian Economics course, at home, independently, then I feel empowered.*

You are saying that this happened to you as a distance learner, not because you simply chose to be a distance learner, but because the distance learning format itself facilitates these effects. *Mm-hmm. I think someone who goes into teaching because they want a roomful of adoring students is not going to choose to teach through distance education. So maybe, people who teach are pre-selected as those who have a less hierarchical notion of what it means to be the teacher. I love that saying, "guide on the side versus sage on the stage." There is no stage in distance ed., and so to me, that helps to create the kind of environment where you do have guides on the side. Sometimes my guides in distance learning are faculty, professors, and sometimes, they are fellow students. I am in a conference right now where one of the students has become the expert in this particular segment of the conference, because her experience with this particular topic leads her to take that role. She probably won't be when we focus on another issue, but she is presently a resource to the group. The conference leader lets her do it, and why not? The instructor comes in at appropriate times, but does not seem to have any problem letting her be the expert that she is. I have not seen*

this happen in a regular classroom, even though, in the face-to-face class I'm in now has an average age of thirty nine, and we have people with career backgrounds that bring a lot of experience in their studies. It still does not happen. *It does not happen nearly as much, no.* You think it is because of the instructor, and that people who are involved with distance learning – *yes the educators, but also the format. If the expert we mentioned above had to quit her job to come and study, she would have to leave behind her current present-day experience, which she presently shares with us.*

Hermeneutic reading:

Within her distance learning experience, Meg believes that (a) because of increased access to learning opportunities, (b) because of the distance learning format, which encourages a lived time and a lived space that is all the time and everywhere, (c) because of the diversity of people within the distance learning environment that are readily available for interaction, (d) because of the teaching styles of faculty, and (e) because of the learning choices and options that the distance learning system offers, she (a) is able to participate in a learning community, (b) is empowered to be a lifelong learner, (c) has more control over her learning situation, (d) is able to greatly increase her level of confidence, (e) is expected to be and is a competent learner, a responsible learner, and (f) has proudly taken ownership of her learning.

Meg is so convinced that her distance learning experience is one filled with the opportunity for personal growth and development that she feels that the meaning of being a distance learner is to experience transformation. The meaning of being a distance learner for Meg has made her an advocate for the distance learning system.

Consultative review

[Italics indicate Meg's input; regular print is the author's; underlining is for emphasis]

Although I didn't think of it at the time, the experience I gave you in the protocol is one of being empowered as a learner by that professor. Coming from a place where I was not feeling at all confident as a learner, that simple word from him made a world of difference, and I wonder what would have happened if he hadn't said what he did. He didn't have to say things in his comments. He could simply have said, "This is fine, you'll have no problem writing the papers," but he didn't. He went beyond that, and he said more. It's back to being empowered and feeling confident, confident enough to take responsibility for your own learning. So again, that common thing seems to be coming through as we talk. Whether it's a tutor in a paper-based course, or in a graduate course where you work much more closely with faculty, that factor of empowering the learner is an aspect of distance learning. You have defined the difference between distance learning and the classroom situation. In distance learning, you feel a connection with your tutor, your instructor, whereas in the classroom situation, you do not feel the same connection. *Umm, I don't think the classroom excludes it, but it is harder to make that connection in the classroom. I'm wondering if a trait of people who are working with distance learners, because they don't see the students, is that they are intentional about providing that kind of support to students. The support you get from the, I'll call them the educational leaders (instructors, tutors, professors) is a <u>really</u> important piece of student support. That support is there in distance learning unless you have a bad instructor, but it's only there in classroom learning if you have a really, really good instructor. My experience has been that this student support is the norm in distance*

learning, and not the norm in the classroom, and that's been a critical piece of the learning environment for me because it's given me that confidence and made me able to take the responsibility for my own learning. I'm wondering what helps students become self-directed and responsible for their learning. I like a paced format, which may seem like a contradiction to my opinion about the advantage of having choices. You can have a learning community in paced distance learning. But because of the way distance ed. works, I have a lot of choice about when and how I am part of a learning community, and if I want to be part of the learning community.

[After some discussion around the support system that exists in Meg's distance learning world, I said, "You think that providing student support is a part of the mindset within the distance learning community."] *Yeah, I do. They ask "what can I do for the students?"* The distance learning system is more focussed on the consumer, on the student. *Even the word you just used, "consumer", is a word that is not considered in a positive way in most universities. Customer service, client - ooh, icky business language that we don't want to sully academia with. But there are really good things about it, and one is that student support, student-focus that allows the student to have a better learning experience. Distance education has been a factor not only in my education, but in life. To develop that confidence as a learner, and to then have one's horizons expanded because you've been able to have an education, and life changes that come about as a result of that. So to develop that confidence in myself as a learner helped me to develop a lot of confidence in general. And I would doubt that this is a unique experience. My guess would be that there are a number of people, and particularly women, who, as a result of being able to earn a degree, find the experience*

to be a boost for in their lives. Distance learning makes this possible. Access is a really important feature of distance ed.

This discussion about confidence brings us back to your protocol. I would like to go through the protocol together and see what that description means to you, what you have thought about that particular experience since you lived it. Writing about this lived experience may have encouraged you to later reflect about the incident. As well, we'll review together the expanded reading and the hermeneutic reading. Anything that I write is not there for your approval. You want to give your own interpretation of the writing. You can add, comment, disagree, agree… I am not looking for your approval of my interpretation, but rather we are having a consultative review about your narrative. *Mm-hmm. This is interesting how you use the words, "disbelief of her own worthiness." I hadn't thought about it in those terms.* [Meg related her struggle between being considered stupid and her ongoing desire to pursue an education.]

[Meg talked about why she chose a distance education format.] *There are a couple of reasons why I chose distance ed. The first one is that I didn't need to commute; I didn't need to find child care, and if somebody was sick at home from school one day, I could still work or do it later. A big aspect of it was that I did not want to spend two hours commuting to a class that was an hour long. Also, it probably was an easier entry point for me than going back to a university, which certainly was intimidating. It would have been very scary to go back there.* Because of how you left in the first place. *Right, right. So although there were a lot of practical reasons for choosing distance ed., there were probably some things that at the time, I didn't recognize as reasons for choosing distance ed.* What about the feeling of

anonymity? *I don't know if I sought anonymity as much as I wanted to avoid the traditional university.* So it was the environment that was threatening. If you go into a distance learning situation, there is the potential that nobody has to know you even registered. *That's true.* You are re-entering the formal learning world with a history as described in your protocol writing, and using a format that allows the possibility to keep your educational plans a secret from everyone, including your family. You can register anonymously. If it doesn't work out, nobody knows *(nobody knows)* but you. You say you want to avoid humiliation. You fled; now you have the courage to take the first step, and "I don't want anybody to know; I want to avoid further humiliation." *And I didn't tell anybody, other than my then husband that I was going back to school because if it didn't work out, as you say, nobody needs to know that I went back and failed again. That was the big fear in my mind, that if I fail again, "it's true, I am stupid."* And that's what took so much courage; taking that risk. *Yeah, exactly.* So it is valid then to include anonymity as a distance learning quality that was meaningful to you.

[Meg agreed with the interpretations in the third paragraph of the protocol writing.] *"Privacy," or "anonymity" is even a better word. This was important at that stage* [meaning Meg's time of re-entry into formal learning], *but now in the graduate program, it is the opposite.* Although anonymity can be a desired quality of the distance learning world, you can also choose not to be anonymous. Again, you can choose your preference. *It's part of that choice, and at the time, it was what I needed.* Mm-hmm. *Now, I don't. Now, I'm confident enough.* At the beginning of your distance learning experience, one of the qualities of the distance learning world allowed you to renew your formal education, and now that quality is still there, but you don't need it. *Mm-hmm.* And that's okay, because you can choose to use other aspects of the system *(right)* that allow you to be totally open and free

(mm-hmm) to communicate with other learners. *Mm-hmm.* And the distance learning world includes the both opportunities for you. *Right. You can choose how much contact you want to have with fellow students. You can choose to be anonymous, or choose to relate more closely with selected individuals.*

[In the fourth paragraph of the protocol, Meg answered my question. It was eight years since the quote in the protocol writing.]

[We talked about the fifth paragraph of the protocol. Meg defined "real".] *"Real professor" means a representative of the academic world. I needed the feeling that academia had given me their blessing.* [Meg shares that this person who gives their blessing for her to join the academic community had to be an authority figure because authority figures, although not educators, had supported the notion that she was not university material, and was stupid.] *I took the risk; I made the leap. I needed to hear then that I could do this.* [Meg shared her total experience with her first university where she lived through her disastrous year.] *It was rejection. When I look back on it now, it was rejection by the academic community. "You don't belong here. We don't want you here. Even if you come, we won't let you be part of us." That's what I was hearing from them.* [Meg referred to the professor in her protocol writing.] *Yes, and here was a member of that community, a different community, but a representative of academia saying "sure, you can come in."* So that's what you mean by "real" *(yeah)*, to be from the same environment *(yeah)* of the one that rejected you in the first place. *Yeah. And "why does it take 'this' to prove she's not stupid?" Because "they" had rejected me, so it is "they" who need to* (bring you back) *bring me back.* So "this" refers to the actual representative of the community that rejected you. Somebody equal – *yeah, yeah.*

[We discussed Meg's comment, "I had what it took." Meg concluded that it takes confidence and support; it takes people who give you ownership of your learning experience so you can develop a feeling of competence.]

[After some more discussion, I said, "You keep bringing back confidence all the time."] *Yep, I think it's important and especially critical for women. I would like to think it is different for your daughters and my daughter, but I'm not sure that it is. There are issues around empowerment and confidence that happen all the time.* [Meg meant that these problem issues about empowerment and confidence still exist today.]

[In her last paragraph of the protocol, Meg laughs.] *Oh yeah, "If you knew the whole story, then you would really see how far I have come." Yeah, that's true.* I am reading into your words. *And you are reading them correctly. From being someone who felt she would never get a university degree, to having an undergraduate and one and two-thirds master's degrees, and am seriously looking at doctoral work. This is incredible, mind boggling.* So what more can you say but "and then some…," because it is still ongoing. *It's still ongoing.*

[Meg reads the last sentence of my interpretation in the expanded reading.] *Yep, transformation, absolutely. That's probably why I'm quite attracted to studying transformational learning. It's quite interesting how that happens. What is that something? How can it happen?* You experienced a transformation as a distance learner. *Mm-hmm.* The meaning of being a distance learner for you has actually meant transformation. *Mm-hmm, yes, yep. Absolutely, it does.* The experience of transformation for you has meant that you were a person living with fear, living with a lack of self-esteem, self-worth, and a total lack of confidence academically. Now you are transformed into being a person who is a risk-taker, not concerned about having the courage to conquer fears, to being very confident and

feeling assured enough to express that confidence, and feeling very competent. And inspired to do more. *Yes, yeah, very much so.*

What is the essence of distance learning? I chose distance learning for very practical reasons. I agree that there was probably a subtext there that I wasn't aware of – around the anonymity that made it safer to take the risk that I felt I was taking. The meaning of being a distance learner – I guess I'd come back to that empowerment, and being encouraged to be self-directed and responsible, and the support of the institution, the faculty, and fellow learners. What's the essence of distance learning? I think it's the encouragement to be a self-directed learner that comes with distance learning, and that I don't think is there to the same degree in the classroom. It's not to suggest that you can't be a self-directed learner in the classroom, but I think much about distance education is encouraging you to be self-directed, and facilitates that process. What I experienced in the distance learning lifeworld is unique to the distance learning experience because it would have been less likely that I would have had the same experience in traditional education.

[A quote from the hermeneutic reading: "Meg will be able to validate whether being a distance learner for her means participation in a world that facilitates confidence building, the development of positive self-esteem, and whether being a distance learner means an experience of transformation."] *I would answer, "Yes, yes, yes."*

[The discussion led to the conclusion that the meaning that Meg has attached to being a distance learner absolutely depends on educators within the distance learning world who are extremely sensitive to student support. Technological tools are secondary to the human considerations. The people in the distance learning world are of primary importance, and the distance learning environment needs to be a warm lifeworld.] *Everytime a learner is*

choosing distance education, it has the potential to be a transforming experience. You are saying that the cognitive elements within the distance learning world are not the only components to be recognized. There are the feelings and emotions that are of paramount importance to the distance learner, who is in the midst of a potentially transforming experience. *Mm-hmm. Distance learning facilitates the transformational experience because of its format, and provides the opportunities for people to learn who would be denied that chance if they did not have the option to access learning via distance. Without distance learning, so many more people would miss the opportunity to expand their perspectives and broaden their world.* [We discussed how distance learning adds the potential in our world for so many more people to take advantage of personal development and growth.] *Whether you are a thousand miles away from school, or whether you are two blocks from school, but you have a full time job and three little kids, it's just not possible to do that all the time in a face-to-face environment, but in distance ed., it is.*

You have confirmed my own interpretations, right? *Yes, yep.* You described personal transformation as the meaning of being a distance learner for you. You said, "Because I have become more confident in my learning environment, because I have a better self-esteem, I have improved my sense of well-being in my life, not just the educational part of my life, but generally, in my whole life. I have been able to do other things in other parts of my life because of my experience as a distance learner. It has spread; it has broadened *(mm-hmm)* my perspective on life, but it has also broadened me as a person." *Absolutely.* "And it has spread to other parts of my life, in my professional environment, in my familial world, in my marital relationship, or in some other personal situation. That personal development, that personal growth that happened to me as a distance learner, is meaningful because it has

allowed me to also experience those things in other parts of my life." *Oh yeah, absolutely. And would that have been possible without distance learning? Possible, but not likely. Education has transformed my life in all the ways that you have mentioned. Yeah, life expanding in many, many ways that I attribute directly to the confidence that I developed as a result of having success as a learner, which is directly related to the support that I got as a distance learner.*

[Meg finished.] *This is fascinating. It really is, this way of working. I am really anxious to see what happens to your thesis.*

[After some further consultation back and forth, Meg and I came to this summation: Meg confirmed that some of the qualities within the distance learning system were (a) the ability to pursue studies anonymously, (b) the provision of learning opportunities that are accessible, and (c) the facilitation and encouragement given to learners to be self-directed. More importantly, Meg reiterated the meaning of being a distance learner as an experience that is empowering, that builds confidence and self-esteem, that promotes growth and development, and that encourages learners to be self-directed and responsible for their learning. After both the phenomenological descriptions and the hermeneutic process, being a distance learner for Meg meant a positive transformational experience.]

CHAPTER SEVEN

INTERPRETATIONS

What Was the Intent?

I wanted to explore the being and becoming a distance learner. My aim was to inquire into the meaning and significance of distance learning by listening to distance learners as they shared their experiences through narratives and by examining the distance learning lifeworld through the descriptions of lived experiences. It is my hope that by explicating the distance learning lifeworld we gain insights into how the distance learning environment is inhabited and known. By further understanding the distance learner experience and by reflecting upon the essential qualities within the distance learning system, we can work toward keeping effective and valued qualities within the distance learning lifeworld or work toward changes within the system that better serve the distance learners' experience.

Explicating what it means to be a distance learner led to dialogue about the strengths and weaknesses of the distance learning system. Writings and conversations led to insights about what are the existing valued, effective and essential qualities within the distance learning world, as well as what is missing in the lifeworlds of distance learners. Let us review these insights by focussing on each co-researcher individually.

Louise

Whereas Calder (1993) writes, "confidence, its acquisition or retention, appears [emphasis added] to play a key role in adults' judgements about the worth of a learning experience" (p. 133), Louise confirms that enabling learners to acquire and sustain feelings of

confidence does play a key role within the distance learning experience, and that confidence is interrelated to self-esteem, so that distance learning is connected to personal development. The extra challenge and stimulation that the distance learning system requires of students enhances a sense of accomplishment and a sense of fulfillment that builds confidence, positive self-esteem and self-worth, a sense of power and equality.

Louise's experience as a distance learner coincides with Kahl and Cropley's (1986, p. 38) assessment of psychological consequences when they found that distance learners differed from face-to-face learners in that they were more "isolated."

In addition, Kahl and Cropley (1986) suggest that in order to increase levels of self-confidence, teaching and learning approaches which help students master difficulties is preferable to accepting distance learning as a more difficult learning situation with limiting factors. Within the distance learning setting, Louise's lived experience confirms that this proactive suggestion is not only valid but it facilitates further learning and student empowerment. For Louise, being a distance learner meant that she experienced adaptability to change ("high self-esteem correlates with comfort in managing change" [Branden, 1994, p. 242]), and she increased her feelings of self-control and power.

Lengrand (1975) proposes that this feeling for self-control is an ingredient that makes education a source a happiness (p. 101). Louise describes her lived experience as a distance learner as one that increased the level of happiness at home, at work, and with herself.

In accordance with Sears and Sherman's research (1964, p. 11), Louise's sense of achievement and success reduced her sense of fear and anxiety, increased the accuracy of self-perception, and increased self-esteem. Distance learning has nurtured Louise's self-esteem, in many of the ways that Krupp (1991, p. 14) suggests, that is (a) building success

experiences, (b) giving more self-responsibility and empowerment, (c) building positive self-attitudes, and (d) expanding the learning community and learner support system.

One of Louise's most significant experiences as a distance learner was (a) the development of a lived time where the future is not limited and (b) a lived space with no boundaries, both of which contribute to an expanded learning world. Because of her distance learning experience, Louise grew to enjoy a sense of identity and a sense of belonging in this learning lifeworld. She moved from a sense of isolation to a life of expanded connections.

Similar to Cropley's (as cited in Dave, 1976) notion that lifelong education is a tool for developing individuals (p. 199), Louise feels that distance learning facilitates lifelong learning, and that because of her experience as a distance learner, she is now a lifelong learner. Maslow (1970, p. 134) believes that it is of utmost social and interpersonal importance to have a larger horizon, a wider breadth of vision, and to live in a wider frame of reference. Louise relates that as a result of her distance learning experience, her world is now wider, more broadened for her and that this growth has significantly influenced her social, professional and interpersonal world.

For Louise, being a distance learner means taking risks while gaining a sense of freedom and living the experience of transformation. "Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go" (T. S. Elliot, 1995).

Axel

Axel describes the distance learning system much as Jarvis (1995, p. 159-162) does: that is, one with post-modern features such as increased and advanced technology, space-time

distanciation, globalization, reflexivity that demands a constant examination and reexamination of social practices, and individuation.

Harrison (1993, p. 5) defines two different approaches to access learning, (a) the provider model that caters to the convenience of institutions that offer education on site, and (b) the user model that emphasizes methods to bring the learning to the learners. Axel's lived experience with distance learning leads him to recommend the user model. For instance, Axel suggests that encouragement at the onset of and during courses helps to decrease a student's feelings of isolation and lack of motivation (as also suggested by another distance learner in Takemoto, 1991, p. 16). Whereas Spencer (1995) writes that the "challenge for distance education is to include social learning within the delivery system" (p. 94), Axel, because of personal experience, believes that such social contact is feasibly attained. Axel agrees with research results from the Chomienn, Basque and Rioux study (1997, p. 169), that is, technologies now offer possibilities of communication that diminish the isolation factor for students.

Knowing about Axel's lifeworld as a distance learner, we can learn from his input and reflect upon recommendations that develop from his distance learning experience, such as:

1. Self-pacing is important, but it is advantageous to keep the cohort experience.
2. Technological tools are an asset, but the system must not lose the human element.
3. Independent learning is empowering, but recognition, opportunity to share and demonstrate knowledge is needed as well.

Some of the essential qualities of distance learning, that is quality control, accessibility, an environment that enhances personal growth and development, confidence, self-esteem,

self-responsibility, independent learning and self-awareness, create a learning lifeworld that presents limitless possibilities. For Axel, being a distance learner has expanded his world, as well as his worldview of education.

Throughout his narratives, Alex describes how distance learning is an experience where isolation, connection and relatedness are qualities within the system that are constantly addressed by students. How these qualities (isolation and connection) relate to people and to applied knowledge or knowledge demonstrated is a balancing act for learners. According to Alex, connections between these elements make distance learning "real." In other words, Alex says that connections (human and otherwise) change illusions to concrete realities.

For Axel, the "gleeful moments" of being a distance learner mean opportunity, hope, empowerment and a transformational experience.

Meg

As a result of their longitudinal research study (concentrating on confidence, competence, and control in learning), Beaty and Morgan (1992, p. 9) report that students seek self-development and/or want to prove that they are capable of degree-level work. Meg's lifeworld as a distance learner led her to experience both of these elements. The qualities within the distance learning system that enabled Meg to reenter the educational system were (a) the increased access to learning opportunities, (b) the format that allowed an "anytime'" and "everywhere" lived time and space, (c) anonymity, (d) learner-centered teaching styles, (e) increased learning choices and options. "Electronic computing technologies that have given us the Internet and the World Wide Web seem to function without a sense of place and time. And ironically once we invent a technology that will provide synchronicity, we seek

the flexibility of asynchronous communications." (Haughey, 1998, p. i) Such was the case with Meg.

Given more control over her learning situation, Meg was able to become a self-directed learner, responsible for her own learning. Able now to take ownership of her learning, Meg became a competent and confident learner. In accordance with Krupp's (1991) definition of self-esteem (p. 145), Meg's distance learning experience helped her to build her self-esteem and thereby become a risk-taker, and a person who comes to appreciate her own worth. Through her experience as a distance learner, Meg finally found that learning could be an "emotionally safe place where there are helpers who acknowledge that students have the right to choose the overall direction of learning". Little (1995) writes in her paper that "to repair self-esteem, feelings of inferiority and insecurity must be addressed" (p. 10). In her distance learning lifeworld, Meg finds the opportunity to repair the damage done through previous educational experiences.

Lived space "helps us uncover more fundamental meaning dimensions of lived life" (van Manen, 1990, p. 103). Meg's lived space within her distance learning lifeworld is anywhere and everywhere. Accordingly, distance learning enhances opportunities for lifelong learning. For Meg, this meant personal development and growth, empowerment, transformation, "and then more."

Simonne

Like Louise, Axel and Meg, my experience as a distance learner means opportunity, hope, added value to the educational system, challenge, stimulation, a sense of accomplishment, a better future, personal growth and development, access to learning, a

better sense of well-being, actualization and transformation. The similarities between us are evident in our meaning of being a distance learner.

I remember Louise describing that through distance learning she has discovered "an open and beckoning future." With this discovery she developed the feeling of being able to pursue whatever she wants to pursue and that her future is not limited as it was before. When she described this expanded world, I remember thinking, "My goodness, I have to review this several times to make sure that I am staying with Louise's original draft, and not projecting my own narrative into Louise's because being a distance learner has affected my lived time in a similar way." I did revisit the tapes and check out what Louise had said with the intention of questioning "is this me? Am I starting to project myself here, because I have experienced the same as Louise." I had to make sure I was staying with Louise's original narrative, and not interjecting my feelings or lived experience into hers. But no, I wasn't thinking of my experience at the time. I was identifying with Louise's. As I wrote in the abstract and again in chapters one and three, the intent of phenomenological hermeneutic work is to relate to the narratives and to learn from them. As I did, I hope that you too have found personal and/or professional connections with our narratives. The intent of the narratives and the interpretations is to further our understanding of the distance learning lifeworld. By so doing, I hope we have learned something of value for ourselves and for the development of the distance learning world.

An Open Phenomenological Approach to Learning:

> I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience,

> to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you be my teacher and help me understand? (Spradley, 1979, as cited in Kvale, 1996, p. 125).

What more can we learn from the common conversations of daily life? "Rather than dismissing commonsense understanding as unscientific, ... systematic reflection on common sense understanding and on ordinary language conversations may contribute to a refined understanding of a human world understood as a conversational reality" (Kvale, 1996, p. 285).. Pondering upon the question of what more we can learn from a phenomenological hermeneutic approach leads to the final chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT

REFLECTIONS

Van Manen (1990) writes that it is "inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary of a phenomenological study" (p. 13). The narratives and the interpretations themselves are the results. Describing original experience is primal telling. "Language that authentically speaks the world rather than abstractly speaking of it is a language that reverberates the world" (p. 13). In this study the intent is to discover the ontological core, the nature of being a distance learner. It is the participatory nature of the study that leads readers to reflect and make their own meaningful interpretations and apply that meaning to what is relevant to them in their professional and/or personal lives.

Symbiotic Relationship

Reflecting back on the literature review, I write about a symbiotic relationship between distance learning, lifelong learning, and personal development. I say that distance learning is connected to lifelong learning and to personal development because it expands the learning opportunities for individuals. Learning from this study, however, I need to add that not only does access play a role in this relationship, but the distance learning format itself is also a key factor. In addition, distance learning is not only connected to personal development through its connection with lifelong learning, but distance learning fosters personal development directly because of its essential qualities.

Protocol and Conversation

As a researcher, I learned from both the protocol writing and the conversations. Although the method of writing is different from the method of conversing, both lead to writing, reflection, interpretation, consultation, more writing, more interpretation and ongoing reflection. It would be interesting to see if a phenomenological hermeneutic study could be totally achieved through distance interaction, using dialogue without any face-to-face communication.

I say this out of total curiosity. I thought, previous to this study, that the face-to-face conversations were a necessary component of the research. My experience with the protocol writing leads me to question that assumption. In addition, my experience with some of the consultation process and any other interaction that happened without face-to-face discussion encourages me to place more value in the substance of textual and audio connections then I previously assumed. Further, the narratives themselves speak of the added value (as opposed to diminished value) of communication done via a distance format. As well it would be interesting to follow up on existing research by Annand and Haughey (1997) who tell us that they found telephone interviews more effective than face-to-face interviews. They report that they were able to make notes without distracting the participants. "The telephone also seemed to allow a franker and deeper exchange of views because [the participants] could concentrate on [their] words. [They] were not self-conscious about appearances and did not have to be concerned about maintaining eye contact or providing other nonverbal cues" (p. 132).

If we consider Bloom's taxonomy in relation to the protocol process, the co-researchers were able to recall or recollect (demonstrate knowledge) and to comprehend what they knew

by stating information in their own words. Through the protocol process, the co-researchers were able to apply information to solve issues. For instance, Axel was able to see the balance and the ongoing circular pattern between isolation and connection/relatedness within his distance learning lifeworld. Although analysis is not the aim in the phenomenological hermeneutic process, the interpretive element looks at formulating meanings from the significant statements and uses these meanings to develop themes. The process is not analytical because within the phenomenological hermeneutic process we do not break a problem down into parts for the purpose of studying parts as separate entities. (Remember, however, that some of these parts may be picked up as valuable components to be studied individually via a different methodology.) The process is interpretive because by recognizing themes we discover essential qualities within the whole for the purpose of further understanding the whole.

I now see the potential to (a) share description over the telephone, via tape recordings and through textual means, to (b) formulate meanings into themes through individual and collaborative reflection, to (c) make interpretations and to (d) consult together using a distance format with the intention to further explicating the meaning of the phenomena. I see that there is potential for researchers and co-researchers to make evaluations using existing information by internalizing the information through a reflective process and sharing meaningfully the information using dialogue that excludes face-to-face contact. To the best of my knowledge, this method of doing a phenomenological hermeneutic study has never been attempted. Therefore it is yet to be seen whether a phenomenological hermeneutic study using distance methods to communicate interactively is less effective, just as effective or more effective than a phenomenological hermeneutic study that relies on face-to-face contact.

As I said in chapter one it was curiosity that led me to this study and it is my curiosity again that makes me wonder if a phenomenological hermeneutic study could be totally achieved through distance interaction, using dialogue without any face-to-face communication.

Performance indicators

My research has led me to reflect on various issues within the distance learning system. One of these issues deals with the aspect of performance indicators. Identifying performance measures for distance learning has added complications because there are different forms of distance learning. Using existing (usually determined by governmental policy) performance measures is inadequate because existing performance indicators are geared toward campus-based universities where the focus is more on the numbers of degrees awarded, graduation rates and time to degree completion. Campus-based education is more oriented to time constraints. In contrast, as was vividly shared by the co-researchers in this study, lifelong, ongoing and continuous learning are essential qualities of the distance learning system. Therefore, within the distance learning system, the statistics related to times to degree completion, etc. are not indicative of an inefficient system, but rather they are indicative of serving learners' needs. "Completion/retention is an indicator that potentially can be damaging to distance education institutions ... [because] there is a strong sociopolitical view that degree-granting institutions are effective and efficient only to the extent that they graduate students at the degree level in some optimal period of time" (Shale and Gomes, 1998, p. 11).

In addition, as Axel readily describes, the teaching/learning process in distance

learning is different from the usual classroom-based instruction. An appropriate set of measures that addresses such differences as the variant contact hours, materials preparation, student load and office hours are needed to effectively measure the distance learning format. "Distance education course workloads are notorious for being heavy. Experience with the distance education and feedback from students have helped to make the workloads more equitable with on-campus study" (Shale and Gomes, 1998, p. 18). This thesis provides data that is relevant to the issue of student load as well as information that puts emphasis on the need to keep or incorporate flexible contact hours, thoughtfully prepared high quality materials and extended office hours.

Further, collaborative programming (where more than one institution is involved in the development and delivery of a program) is a value-added and effective feature of the distance learning system and needs performance indicators that recognize this distinct feature. "In the case of lifelong learning and collaborative offering of programs, mere counts may not be adequate to assess how well the distance education providers do. Perhaps a testimonial style of qualitative account obtained from surveys would be more appropriate" (Shale and Gomes, 1998, p. 18). This qualitative study serves to provide data that complements survey results by enriching assessments with in-depth accounts about how well distance education providers do.

Louise exemplifies the need to include an employment indicator as one of the performance indicators when she describes how her distance learning experience has empowered her to take steps that have positively influenced her work. Taking risks and expanding connections within her professional world has made her more effective in her employment situation. In fact, all the co-researchers in this study described the relevance of

their distance learning studies to their professional lives. An employment value-added measure is warranted.

Along with the other co-researchers, Meg helps us to recognize the economic benefits of distance learning. The ability to continue one's employment, to stay in one's respective community and to care for one's family while studying requires a method of assessing this benefit associated with distance learning.

What about the research and development indicators? As "part of their mission statement, AU [Athabasca University] has a commitment to research and development that advances the state of understanding and practice of distance education" (Shale and Gomes, 1998, p. 16). This phenomenological hermeneutic study furthers our understanding of the distance learning world and the conversations serve to provide useful information in the development of specialized indicators appropriate to distance learning that require "a much wider scope than is displayed in those presently used" (p. 19).

Technologically-based Instruction

Another aspect of distance learning that my research has led me to reflect upon is the whole issue of the advantages, disadvantages, effectiveness and possible handicaps of technologically-based instruction. In accordance with Daugherty and Funke (1998), the co-researchers within this study confirm that they experienced "(a) meaningful learning of technology through the integration of course content and computer applications, (b) increased access to the most current and global content information available, (c) increased motivation, and (d) convenience" (p. 21).

Louise, Axel and Meg all agree that their distance learning experiences introduced them

to a global learning community that widened and expanded their world. The phenomenon of being a distance learner exposed them to the issues of (a) isolated learner (isolation factors are balanced with connections and relatedness factors), (b) student motivation (overcoming limitations and gaining value-added learning because of the need to concentrate not only on content knowledge, but to learn new educational process tools that led to feelings of competence with newfound capabilities), (c) a new sense of the discovery of learning and appreciation for the variety and quality of materials (that is, an expanded learning world through the availability and the diversity of information, learning tools and people) and (d) personal growth (in particular, the development of positive self-esteem and the experience of transformation).

The co-researchers all described their distance learning experiences as it related to interactivity between themselves and their instructors, as well as between themselves and their peer students. Regarding this issue, the comments in their narratives correspond with the results from the Daugherty and Funke (1998, p. 32) findings that indicate positive feelings toward the degree and the quality of online communication. The co-researchers add their own evidence to support the importance of transactional distance. The effect of the transaction between the learners and the instructor, regardless of their proximity, is "particularly relevant with respect to CC or other distance media. Although the 'geographic' distance between instructor and learner may be great, the 'transactional' distance may indeed be close" (Andrusyszyn and Davie, 1997, p. 114).

In accordance with the Daugherty and Funke (1998, pp. 32-36) study, this study supports the findings that (a) flexible lived time and space, (b) learning technologically-based applications essential for today's workforce, (c) convenience and (d) improved

communication with faculty are definite advantages with distance learning. As Axel and Meg point out, the distance learning system follows a more user-based model than a provider-based model.

This qualitative approach presents a finding that deviates from the Daugherty and Funke (1998) study. Although this research supports the "profound finding" (Daugherty and Funke, 1998, p. 37) that the convenience factor is an essential quality of distance learning, this study indicates that a more profound result from the distance learning lifeworld is the transformational experience associated with personal development and growth.

Isolation and Connection/relatedness

Meg would disagree with Kanuka and Anderson (1998, p. 68) that conceptual inconsistencies are left unchallenged in online discussions. Meg's lived experience supports her assessment that conflicting information is not ignored in online communications. Kanuka and Anderson (1998) "acknowledge that there is much additional internal processing that is not documented in [their] study" (p. 68) and perhaps Meg's experience adds credence to the limitations of the Kanuka and Anderson study. Kanuka and Anderson (1998) write that "further research is required to understand why most of the online postings observed in [their] study were limited to the social interchange category" (p. 72). Meg states, in this research, that she and her distance learning cohorts did indeed experience knowledge construction in their dialogues, not just social interchange. Moreover, she and her face-to-face peers created a distance learning method of communicating in order to move beyond the social interaction and thereby enhance a learning community, similar to what already existed in her distance learning situation.

Let us recall the details of Meg's narrative. She was involved in two programs at once, one was face-to-face and the other was through distance learning. In her distance learning lifeworld, she experienced ongoing dialogue with her class and her instructor through computer mediated communications (CMC). She describes this environment as a real learning community where critical thinking, meaning negotiation and the sharing of information which had been processed internally in a reflective manner were components of the discussions. At the same time, she was also studying in a separate program that was face-to-face. In the latter, Meg and her student peers found that it was difficult to meet as a group at the same time. Meanwhile she and her distance student peers met regularly asynchronously. When Meg and her face-to-face peers did meet, the social elements dominated the environment, and discussions regarding content knowledge was lacking. Meanwhile, her distance learning dialogues continued satisfactorily. Eventually, Meg and her face-to-face peers borrowed a distance learning tool to enhance the learning in their face-to-face situation. They set up an asynchronous electronic mail communication system. As a result, Meg shares in her narrative that the relative anonymity and the asynchronous nature of online conversation did not deter discussion where dissonance and inconsistency existed between participants' views. Kanuka and Anderson (1998) end by writing that they look forward to additional research and reflection on the use of online communication within the educational world and ask: "Is it possible that we are just beginning to evolve and develop in our understanding and skills relevant to communication in online learning environments?" Learning from Meg's experience, I would answer "yes."

As a reader and as a researcher

Ultimately, it is the participatory aspect of a phenomenological hermeneutic study that warrants our attention. Being able to relate to and with the co-researchers leads to a reflective process that helps us to better understand the distance learning lifeworld. As I aspire to serve distance learners I feel better able to understand their needs because of the in-depth and rich data shared through a methodology that encompasses all aspects of the distance learning lifeworld. A wholistic contextual perspective on distance learning does not try to understand the lifeworld in question through reductionism and fragmentation, but rather through the interconnectiveness of reality. The phenomenological hermeneutic approach is a collaborative approach that allows participants to choose and describe the essential qualities within distance learning from lived experiences, not one that begins from a preconceived notion. At the same time, the shared information serves to direct us to possible hypotheses about distance learning and encourages research in areas that the learners themselves acknowledge as important areas to be examined and studied. By listening to distance learners' narratives, we can learn what people in the distance learning world are attempting to do, to accomplish, to gain and to discover. By explicating the narratives we come to further understand the essence of the phenomenon, the meaning and significance of being a distance learner. We want to understand the lifeworlds of distance learners for the purpose of discovering what affects a distance learner's well-being and what essential qualities within the distance learning world have an effect on the effectiveness and quality of distance learning for learners. What have we learned through this study that could affect the well-being of distance learners, and what essential qualities within the distance learning world

have we discovered that could have an influence on the effectiveness of distance learning for learners?

Recommendations

I would like to conclude with reflections as they pertain to the implications or uses that this phenomenological hermeneutic study suggests for providers and supporters of distance learners. What have I learned from the explication of distance learners' lifeworlds that gives insights to the existing distance learning qualities that are effective and that therefore should be maintained? What have I learned from the explication of the distance learners' lived experiences that gives insights to areas missing within the distance learning experience that if added to the experience would benefit and improve the lifeworld of distance learners?

1. We accept that using distance learning methods presents an extra challenge to distance learners because in addition to studying content they must acquire the technological skills necessary to facilitate the intercommunicative processes involved within their learning activities. Further, they must take ownership of their learning situation by being responsible for their learning as more independent and self-directed learners. What the co-researchers have taught me is that we should not perceive this challenge as a handicap that puts limitations upon the distance learning lifeworld, limitations that we cannot do anything about. Instead we incorporate teaching and learning approaches which help students master difficulties. By being proactive in this regard, the distance learning environment facilitates value-added learning, the development of self-confidence, positive self-esteem, a sense of power, and enhances a sense of accomplishment.

2. Closely associated to the above is that the distance learning experience means being

able to adapt to change. Louise, in particular, notes how the distance learning format is an ever-changing one that requires one to become comfortable managing change. This is another element within the distance learning lifeworld that enhances the development of self-esteem and that requires distance learning providers and supporters to be sensitive to the learner's needs in this regard. If the distance learning support system does not recognize this, the learners lose the opportunity to increase their feelings of self-control and power. This feeling for self-control makes for a happier educational experience which, according to Louise, increases the level of happiness at home, at work and with oneself. Providers and supporters of distance learning need to reduce the level of fear and anxiety within the distance learning experience by keeping the challenge there, but providing the assistance to meet the challenge.

3. There is the whole issue of isolation/connection that needs attention. We must recognize the preferred choice of some students to be independent and to work on their own. At the same time we must work to diminish feelings of disconnection. Axel points out that there are two areas of relatedness that need consideration. One is the human element and the other is the factor that deals with the application and demonstration of the knowledge. Axel concludes that independent learning is empowering but recognition of acquired knowledge and the opportunity to share and demonstrate knowledge is an important component that instructional designers and educators need to incorporate within the structure of the courses and the program. Distance learning has to be presented and lived so that learners sense a realness with their experience, an experience that feels concrete, not illusionary.

4. Distance learning facilitates lifelong learning. There is substantial evidence of this

connection in the literature. What I learned from this study is that access is not the only advantage that supports this relationship. The distance learning format (a) that facilitates learning to be anytime, anywhere and everywhere, (b) that offers more flexibility with the elements of lived time and lived space, (c) that gives the opportunity for a learner to remain anonymous, (d) that is more conducive to learner-centered teaching styles, (e) that strives to offer more learning choices and options, promotes lifelong learning. In addition, the co-researchers also add that an open admissions policy is a definite asset to the learning system. An open approach that gives all people an equal chance to prove their worthiness as a committed learner is more available through distance learning programs, but this opportunity for hope should be more widespread through distance learning as well as through other learning situations. Further, as providers of distance learning, this study recommends a user model approach that emphasizes methods that bring the learning to the learners. In addition, we discovered through this study that because of its format and methods, distance learning is not only connected to personal development through its relationship with lifelong learning, but distance learning fosters personal development directly because of its essential and unique qualities.

5. Self-pacing is important, but it is advantageous to keep the cohort experience. Program and course designers are advised to study this balance between self-pacing and "belonging to a class."

6. Technological tools are an asset, but the human element must not get lost. Designers, educators, providers and supporters of distance learning must be constantly sensitive to the psychological and emotional needs of learners. The message is very clear that technology is a tool, and the use of technology is to facilitate, not hinder learning.

7. A phenomenological hermeneutic approach is a useful tool to use as a method of identifying performance indicators.

8. A phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry provides rich data for researching such issues as teaching/learning processes. For example, this study touched on topics related to quality control, student/instructor contact hours, materials preparation and office hours. As this study points out in the conversations, tutors/instructors/facilitators must be "trained in the new roles that they have to assume in the context of collaborative distance education" (Chomienne, Basque and Rioux, 1997, p. 154). This study also reveals that "reflective strategies that are integrated into the course design can offer the needed opportunity, space and time for the development of insights as well as offer value and legitimacy to the process (Thorpe, 1995)" (as cited in Andrusyszyn and Davie, 1997, p. 120).

9. For universities such as Athabasca University who are committed to research that aims to further understanding and practice of distance learning, the phenomenological hermeneutic methodology provides useful information toward that objective. For example, refer to the subtopic technologically-based instruction in chapter eight. For added examples, a phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry is an appropriate methodology to use to further our understanding of (a) the phenomenon of reflection or that of critical thinking as they relate to distance learning, (b) the essential qualities within the lifeworld of an online instructor, (c) the nature of transactional distance within the distance learning world. In 1994, researchers recommended qualitative methods that produced rich descriptions of phenomena to "increase our understanding of people's experience with one important area of distance education, that is, the use of communications technologies" (Annand and Haughey, 1997, p. 128).

10. Distance learning is an essential component of the overall learning system. This is a

reality because of all the above stated factors, one of which is the unique qualities within the distance learning lifeworld that enhance personal development. It is within the nature of the distance learning experience for distance learners to feel convinced that being a distance learner means "taking risks," relishing in the "gleeful moments" and "then more," that is *transformation*.

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APPENDIX A

CO-RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHY

The purpose of this information is to record reasons why you, as a distance learner, became interested in distance learning, and why you chose distance learning as a method for learning. This is your opportunity to share why distance learning is part of your lifeworld. Usually, the learner will give educational, professional, personal, and/or geographical reasons for choosing distance learning. Other information might be shared that you feel you want to share that would not be included in the phenomenological description because the later is only concerned with the "whatness" of distance learning, not the "whys."

You can add any information that you feel is relevant to the study. This information will not to be used to identify you, the co-researcher, in the textual writing of the thesis, but only to be used by me, the principal researcher, to better understand the co-researcher's situation.

Although the following topic ideas are not givens, they are simply presented as ideas to possibly help you begin the process. You can put into the biography any information that you feel records reasons why you became interested in distance learning.

Name chosen to be used in the thesis:

Age:

Gender:

Educational background:

Professional background:

Geographical situation:

Familial situation if it relates to the topic:

Reasons why I became interested in distance learning:

My comments:

Past and present experiences are related. Consequently, "life does not create only itself, in the sense of its present phases, but also the means for future purposes and the purposes of the past means" (Dodd, 1996, p. 165). The historical nature of this continuous process of applying meaning upon itself requires that we have some biographical knowledge of the co-researchers. An individual's stock of knowledge is formed as new elements of knowledge (cognitions) and their implications are integrated into the layers of previously acquired knowledge. Previously acquired knowledge itself influences the manner in which new knowledge is integrated." (Collins, 1984, p. 181; Dodd, 1996, p. 116)

Thanks for giving this some thought. Please send what the above has prompted you to do via whatever mode of communication is most comfortable and/or convenient for you.
Smiles from Simonne

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APPENDIX B

A DETAILED ACCOUNT OF LOUISE'S CONSULTATION

Via e-mail, I sent Louise a copy of: (a) her protocol writing, (b) the transcription of our conversations, (c) the expanded readings for both of the above, (d) the hermeneutic readings for both of the above, (e) the writings related to her documentation (journals and timeline), (f) the textual writing that preceded her narratives called "leading up to the narratives."

She read these materials in the privacy of her home. Then we arranged a meeting time and reviewed thoroughly the documentation listed above. Following is a summary of the transcript of our meeting (the italics indicate Louise's input; the regular print is mine):

What I've brought is what I have already sent to you by e-mail. Is there anything at all where the insights do not ring true to you, or you feel there are things that are overemphasized? Perhaps my interpretation is uncomfortable for you in any way, or maybe I've missed some significant points or statements that you made? Let's talk about any or all of these issues.

Take your time.

I could relate to everything but the "omen" part (protocol, expanded reading, first paragraph). I would not have thought of that on my own. I see it the way you see it there, but it's not something I would have picked up. The challenging part, time, the recognition, and the excitement, and all of that, the struggle, the enhancement of my life and the people around me, personal growth, that's all fine. I don't see anything that I don't agree with.

That's all real to you.

Do you think I've missed anything? [Louise could not think of anything missing, but referred back to "the power of vision."] *There is hope, even though you think there may not be a possibility of accomplishing that, it's there; the hope is there, the aspiration too. You can aspire to things that maybe you couldn't before. Mm-hmmm; you've really covered it well.*

[There was nothing else in the protocol writing that Louise felt needed further dialogue.]

You have a copy of this at home. If you want to review this more and come back to me at any point in time with something you want to share, do so. I'm going to be working on this for a while. *Sure, because I can reread it. Everything sounded great. I agreed with everything. Nothing popped out at me. But if I read it a few more times, I may make some other connections, or think of something.* Sure, and if anything at all comes up, you can let me know. *I can e-mail you*? Sure you can.

We'll move on to the conversations. I'll give you the conversations with the expanded and hermeneutic readings that you've already read, that I sent to you. Is there anything there that you want to talk about?

It's very strange to read what you've said. You know it's exactly what you stated. Hearing yourself again, kind of thing. *You do; you do.* I wonder if that means that you feel you're hearing yourself, if I've been able to catch also the way you spoke and that kind of thing. You know when you put in the "mm-hmms" and the pa"es, [pause] and the way that you spoke, I wonder if you're hearing that when you read that. *Oh, I'm sure. I think I tend to emphasize points that I feel very strongly about, and repeat them to make sure that that the message is there.* Actually that makes it easier for me. *Ohh*? When somebody repeats

something, it may be something that has influenced them more, that means more to them, that - *impacted* - the impact is there, yes.

[Louise reviewed the conversations and commented on the expanded reading, first paragraph.] *I agree with that, that it's not confined to the classroom.* Everywhere. *Yeah.* Definitely a significant statement that you made. *That was, definitely. And the personal development* [second paragraph]. You did come back to that - *quite a few* - quite a few times, in various ways.

When I read this part [conversations, expanded reading, third paragraph], *I found it kind of interesting because I was saying how important it was to be connected to other people, and how I reached out so much to others. And yet, I also learned not to need that. I found that almost contradictory as I was reading it.* Yes, I remember thinking that, but I think it's not contradictory, really, when you think about the fact that you saw it as a developmental thing. Here, you're talking about the fact that you felt the need to have contact, but then you do say that "I grew out of that; I grew to the point where I didn't need that feedback." You used a lot of words like "self-evaluate, figure out for myself." *Mm-hmm.* You said this quite a few times - *mm-hmm* - interspersed here and there, how you didn't need that feedback anymore. You can say to yourself now, "I'm doing fine; this is fine; this is okay." *Yes.* And that you felt that had been actually a part of your maturing process in the whole distance learning experience. *Mm-hmm.* You had felt that you had become more mature, more independent, - *mm-hmm* - that he distance learning had done that for you, that you had not needed that kind of – *feedback* - feedback where somebody else had to be saying "it's okay; it's okay, you can" - *confirming.* Uh-huh. *And I think I found too that although I was making the connections with other people, I wasn't necessarily receiving feedback on my*

particular work, or what I had done specifically. It was more of a support system – okay - *because we were in this together, but I didn't need them to say, "this looks good." But at the beginning, I did.* It's not that you don't need feedback in distance learning. Oh no, you need the feedback, but it's a growing feedback; you grow with it rather than depending on it. Growing with it rather than depending on it; that's interesting. *Initially I depended on that feedback to keep going, whereas towards the end of the experience, it was more to use as a catalyst to grow with, with different ideas, different approaches, not necessarily just a confirmation.* Right, okay. *When I first read that, I thought this is how I truly feel. It sounds like I'm contradicting myself, but I'm not, really.*

Do you see the difference now? Before, I was saying we have to describe first; we have to describe, and that we will interpret later. We will reflect later. Right now, we recollect, we recollect. And that you see, now I'm saying, yes, now, reflect. Now, interpret. *Now look at it.* Now look at it. You don't have to just describe now; you get into interpreting anything you want. *And it's good to interpret this.* First it was a recollection; now it is a reflection. *That's right.*

[Louise thought and examined her papers.] *And this here, "not being good enough or failing." It became less important* [conversations, expanded reading, third paragraph]. What a burden to let go. *Oh, it was wonderful!!*

And the freedom of pursuing anything is great too. Yes, when I read all that, I felt very happy for you. I thought, she's had some "wows." *Mm-hmmmm.*

[Louise continued to review the materials.] *Oh, that's good. That's been good-the potential of being a lifelong learner* [third paragraph]. So that's really important, a significant part of your lived experience, the lifelong learning. *Mm-hmm. You're not going*

after a course at a time. It seems more a long-term thing. An ongoing process. *Uh-hum.* Okay, a developmental approach, rather than a goal - *mm-hmm, never finished).* Okay.

This is interesting. [Louise is referring to an interpretation I had made and documented as "more struggle = more excitement" in conversations, expanded reading, fifth paragraph.] *I don't remember saying it, but I agree with it.* Mm-hmm. You kept implying it all the time. If you look at your words there, I don't think it is hard to see the meaning. It's my interpretation, reading between the lines. It is adding to your words in order to get to the meaning, right? This is what I've been trying to do: see your words, read your words, hear your words, and then try and get from that the meaning of your words, get into the word.

[Louise carried on her study of the textual materials.] *Being a risk-taker.* That seems to be important as well. [Louise points to "Definitely, definitely" in the sixth paragraph.]

Oh, this local computer expert [conversations, expanded reading, eighth paragraph]. *I read that and I thought, I'm not exactly a local computer expert, but I suppose in my little world.* I remember when we were talking about that. *But at the school, you can consider it that way. People come to me at the school with their problems.* Exactly, that's when we were talking about.

Do you want me to read this again? Just make sure that you don't leave anything out that you want to discuss. Feel thorough. *I think you've done a really good job of putting it down in a nice concise way.* Yes, but we don't want to miss anything either. *It looks good to me.* Okay. Like I said, if you want to, at any point in time, add, change, take away, whatever. *Okay. You know, everything that you've said is what I was reading into it as well.* Good.

The next thing is to get to the documentation. What I used for that are your two huge binders (the journal writing), and your time line. Really, I think they confirm, affirm what

you already shared in your story. I pointed that out a little bit, saying that- *Accepting risk and adapting to change.* Exactly. *Educating for a lifetime.* Yes. *And that's where I felt it affected me also, as a teacher, in my life. It changed my perspective of teaching, teaching for a lifetime, rather than to master this specific skill, at this specific time. But a bigger picture, that the attitudes are more important then the specific facts.* It made a difference in your teaching style and your teaching approach. I can see that, if it's changed you personally, then that change influences your professional work, because you've become something different, came to think differently, so you're doing things differently. *My values for the students are to pursue learning, aspirations and goals.* Your values have changed. *Yes, they did. Rather than teaching to the curriculum, I teach to help the children want to be learners.*

[At the end of the documentation part, Louise notes the words from the card.] *That was an interesting card.* Yes, it struck me too. Your cartoon also struck me, where Calvin Hobbes says, "What assurance do I have that this education is adequately preparing me for the 21st century? Am I getting the skills I'll need to effectively compete in a tough, global economy? I want a high-paying job when I get out of here! I want opportunity!" And the teacher answers, "In that case, young man. I suggest you start working harder. What you get out of school depends on what you put into it." Calvin replies, "Then forget it."

I thought that card was meaningful. *Mm-hmm.*

I don't know if you've noticed, but what I've noticed about myself, is that when we were in conversation, I was really wanting to make sure that I didn't influence your direction, or your thinking. I wanted to keep the conversation focussed on the meaning of being a distance learner. Certainly I did not want to structure what you were going to say, or what you're going to think, or anything like that. During those conversations, I noticed I was just going

"hum", or whatever. Whereas today, I am more involved in the back and forth dialogue of the conversation; we are interpreting together. *Right.* Before I was listening to your description *(mm-hmm)* and trying to help you continue your description. *mm-hmm. Oh definitely. I felt that you didn't want to influence me, at all. In our previous conversations, I felt you didn't want me to know what you were thinking in order not to bias what I was saying. Because people tend to want to agree with other people, agree or disagree.* I just read something today. It was in a C. S. Lewis book, *Studies in Words*. He said that verbicide, the murder of words, is caused by the fact that people are more anxious to express their approval or disapproval of things rather than to describe them. Therefore, he says, we tend to become less descriptive and more evaluative (1990, p. 7). What you just said reminded me of what Lewis wrote because I wanted you to describe. I didn't want you to approve or disapprove, or to evaluate. *No, and that was quite clear, and I felt that you just wanted to listen to everything I had to say. It was good in that respect because I had not a clue what you would have expected me to say, or wanted me to say at all. It was totally-I was expressing exactly want I felt, which was probably good.* Well, that's what I wanted. I wanted you to describe your feelings of the experience at the time it happened, not after going back on it, or interpreting it. *But I even noticed myself sometimes waiting for a response from you, and you wouldn't say anything. You would just say, "mm-hmm or whatever."* Did that cause a stiltedness in the - *not really.* Okay. *I just noticed that. I knew there was probably a reason for that. You did converse as well, but you really didn't lead me anywhere.* Okay. There would be a balance there that I would want to hit for sure. I would want to make sure that I did not lead you, like you said, but I certainly wouldn't want to make the conversation so stilted that you felt uncomfortable. I would want you to feel comfortable

to share. *Oh no, I felt terribly comfortable to share everything, but at times, I felt like I was almost under the spotlight, or something like that.* You were the important person. *I was it.* It's true; it is your story. *That's right, and I knew that.* You are the important person in the story. *But it's not a position I'm often in, other than as a teacher.*

Let's move to the hermeneutic reading. As you see I really had to abbreviate the whole personal development thing, because we could have written a whole paper on just that aspect alone. It does come back a lot, and I just picked out where it kept coming back [conversations, hermeneutic reading, fourth paragraph]. It certainly is an important aspect; it seems to me. *Yes, I think it is.* And you use the word "stronger" many times. You emphasize "honest" (a more honest person because of a strengthened self-esteem). It took me a while to understand what you meant by "honest." *Is that right?* Yes, the word honest is used in different ways. It took me a while to understand your meaning within the word, honest, and tell me if this is true to your understanding. For you, honest, it relates to the feedback thing, where you had to learn to get your own feedback, to self-evaluate; you had to not cheat on yourself. *Yes, that's right.* You had to be honest with yourself in what you were doing, in what you were giving, and what you were receiving, etc., that you were the winner because of that. *That's what I meant by that. Being honest, being able to say to yourself, no, you're not-* not fooling yourself. *Yes, not fooling yourself. Exactly. Everyone knows when they're putting forth the effort or not. At times, we try to pretend that we are and fool ourselves.* Deceptive. *Very, so that's what I meant.* Yes, but it took me a little while to understand what you meant by honest. *I struggled with that for a long time.* It comes back quite a few times. *I struggled with that for quite a while. And I realized that, that was how I was going to make it, is to face up to the situation I was in, every course I was in. Can I*

handle this? Can't I handle this? How am I going to get through this? I don't like this instructor. How am I going to deal with it? Rather than just not bother thinking about it, trying to solve the problem. Avoiding it rather than dealing with it, rather than just quitting. *Right.*

Like I said, if there's anything that comes up later, that you wish you would have commented on, just do so. *Okay.*

[We had already explored methodological issues, but now we returned to the phenomenological hermeneutic process itself to discuss this approach. Louise is the first co-researcher, and it was valuable for me to explore the methodology with her, to address any weaknesses or strengths in my approach.]

These personal stories, they are your personal stories [Leading to the Narratives, first paragraph]? Yes. I explained how I decided to begin the process by going through the process myself. I hoped to deepen my understanding of other people's contributions by living through the same process, as they would be asked to experience. I present my anecdotes as a distance learner differently because I use them as an introduction to the paper. You might say, Louise, that I use my personal narratives to start the ball rolling, and to increase my chances to understand you and others better.

[Louise continues to examine the papers related to the process.] Does that seem like the process we followed? *Yes.*

One of the issues that my advisor questioned relates to the part where I write, "After the orientation and the protocol work, I met with each of the co-researchers alone for our conversations (the number of which depended on what was necessary to extend the talks to

the point where the co-researchers felt we had reached a depth of conversation that delved into their meaning of being a distance learner)."

My advisor is concerned about whether that statement can be interpreted as my being in control, of when I had decided we had reached a depth of meaning that met my needs, rather than your needs. Now when you say "I wasn't leading you," that confirms for me that I wasn't controlling your input, even subconsciously. *No, not at all.* I wanted to check on that. *I would say definitely not.*

And the other area I would like to specifically discuss with you is where I write, "The format of the conversations was not focussed on data-gathering as one would in a case study or an ethnographic study. As personal preparation for the conversations, I had thought of some questions that focussed on the meaning of being a distance learner. These questions are outlined in chapter three (methodology) and were only designed to prepare my thinking about what possible areas of discussion relate to the meaning of being a distance learner, not prepared for the purpose of structuring or directing the conversations. The purpose of our conversations is to remain descriptive, and to focus on the meaning of being a distance learner. By purpose, I do not mean that there are preconceived directions or questions related to the topic, but I mean that we aim to stay on the topic of being a distance learner. The questions are not used as a tool to structure the exchanges. Phenomenological "interviews" are truly conversational in nature. It is my role to maintain the momentum of the exchange, and to preserve the legitimacy of the research by keeping the topic meaningful. In other words, the dialogue is an activity that accesses the inner-world of a distance learner's personal experience." When we did talk about anything in particular, I want to make sure you didn't feel I was trying to lead you in a particular direction, to try and get you to express

a particular sentiment, but I did make sure that we kept the conversation going. What I mean by "extend" is that we kept the conversation moving deeper into the meaning of being a distance learner. Kept going into the depth of the meaning of being a distance learner, rather than out and away from the lived experience. While we talked you referred to my being a distance learner several times. That helped me to focus on my story as a distance learner. My advisor wonders if when I use the word "purpose", maybe I had a purpose in mind, rather than letting you express your own intent, with your words, your own experience. I just want to make sure that you never felt I had an ulterior purpose or motive, trying to persuade you in any way. *No, no, not at all.* Okay, good, I just wanted to make sure. *I just thought that you wanted to hear what I had to say about distance learning.*

We have obviously taken a step now where you are my teacher. I would really appreciate any comments or feedback at all about the process. I have a couple of questions that I would like to ask you. If at any point in time, that takes you anywhere else you want to go, you just go there, or bring up anything you'd like.

I've been calling this the validation process. It is a term used in phenomenological writing, so it's not a word I've invented myself. My advisor wonders if maybe with the approach we are using, if the word validation gives a different connotation than what we are actually doing in this part of the process. What do you think of "consultative review" instead? We are reviewing your stories under your consultation. It is not that validate is wrong. We are validating, corroborating, or making certain we have the same understanding about what you mean. We are validating my interpretation of what you said. But does the word validation include your input in the process? When we validate, we examine something that is already there. Whereas consultation might mean that we not only validate what's

there, but it includes your freedom to do the same, that is, for you to interpret as much as you want. Consultative review is perhaps more inclusive. *Consultative sounds more interactive.* It does, and this is an interactive process. *Validate sounds formal.* Yes, and I think that 's what the advisor was getting at. We are using a nonformal approach.

Let's go back to the protocol writing, Louise. I have a concern because as soon as you ask someone to write something, I feel you are imposing. I want to talk about that, imposition. *When you first asked me, I thought, what does she want? What am I going to write? I didn't know what you wanted, and that's why I wrote back and said, I have a story about this, and this, and this. What do you think is appropriate?* And that was fine, because when I sent you the orientation material, I said, this is to try and help you understand what is going on, to clarify our roles, and to explain procedure, and to try and educate you about what phenomenological hermeneutic study is. I wanted you to come to me as often as you needed until you did feel ready to write. *But I didn't worry that long about it. I took about a week to think about what I would write about. I think people need time to process. I think you need about a week to mull things over in your head.* Okay. *Also, knowing that it doesn't have to be perfect is really important too.* Yes. *I had that impression after, that I'm just going to write something. And I thought, Simonne will get back to me on this. Knowing that you would respond back to me about it was relieving, because I thought I have to send this and find out, because I wasn't positive. But I didn't feel it was a big imposition.* And it came just fine; all it needed to be was a narrative. *That's what you said; it could even be a short paragraph.*

I would also like you to comment on whether you feel that having to write something first affected the conversations later in any way. *It may have made me focus on that aspect.*

So you would be more ready for the conversation, you mean? *Mmm, well, I thought that the protocol story would probably be one of the important parts of the conversation. Yet, in the conversation, it didn't come up that much.* I can understand what you're saying about the anticipatory aspect. Is there more you want to say about the protocol writing? *No, not really.*

Now, this is something you brought up yourself, and I wanted to check this out myself as well. Did I keep the question of the meaning of the phenomenon totally open for you? *This is one of the things that I thought back on, when I got back home-that feeling of your not directing my stories, was interesting because I just explored everything then. I went into personal things, things that happened at school, lots of different areas.* My nondirective approach led you to be more expanded, or it extended your description of the whole picture. *That's right, because I was more apt to include a lot of different areas, rather than be focussed on a specific area that I thought you might be interested in hearing about, because I didn' t know what you wanted to hear. So I just kept adding everything.* Is that where you felt it helped when I kept referring to you as a distance learner; this helped you to focus on the meaning of being a distance learner. *Right, that kept distance learning the focus, but bringing aspects of it from all areas.*

We've gone through the methodology, the significant statements, and the themes. As a conclusion, do you feel that I understand how you feel about being a distance learner? *Yes.* What you feel about the meaning of being a distance learner, do you think that I have been able to understand that? *Yes.*

Was there anything in the process that was uncomfortable? Like the taping, for instance, or - *taping, at first was little bit nerve-racking, because I felt I had to speak in complete sentences. But after, it was okay.* Actually, I was uncomfortable too at the beginning

because I had never used this particular recorder before; it was a new tool. I certainly wanted to keep it conversational and not let it be a formal, structured kind of interview. And I was concerned that the tape recording would give it a formal feeling. I now feel more comfortable too. Now I know how to work the tool; *it just sits there* - it sits there and there you go. And I know it works. I went through a similar process with you.

Do you think our conversation went too long? *I felt I had a lot to say. I thought I was repeating myself. In some respects, I felt I was overdoing it. I just wanted to make sure I got in everything I wanted to say about my story, which I did.* I thought that the beginning of our conversations was warm-up to our later talks where you really shared the meaning of being a distance learner. I think that is a natural process. On Saturday, I feel there were things that helped to extend our conversation. When we ended, I felt there was no need to extend our talk further. *That's right.* I feel like we've gotten into the meaning of being of a distance learner. I wanted to check with you to see what you felt about that. *Well, I was thinking about that. I basically expressed all I wanted to.* You want to extend the conversation to get to the meaning because you are going into the conversation in depth, but you don't want to beat it to the ground. *I felt good about the sharing. I enjoyed it. It's nice that somebody is interested.* Good.

[We then shared more about the process itself and its effect on us.] *There are things that came up where I was thinking on the spot. I had never thought that before. It just came out. That was interesting.*

This experience has been interesting for me. I had no concerns, but I did feel a little nervous, maybe eager is a better word, because I felt a lot of responsibility for the process and its development, that is, how things evolved. *When you don't know someone really well, and*

you're talking about very personal things, really, like personal development as a person and struggles you've been through. Part of selecting the co-researcher for me was selecting people whom I had little history with. I did not want to enter my relationship with co-researchers with past baggage. I wanted people whom I could trust, people with integrity who could be serious enough about the project to give it a conscientious effort. At the same time, I want the co-researchers to trust me, feel they can be honest with me and can share. *You did not want to "lead" your co-researchers' stories, so if someone knows what your feelings are about certain issues in an in-depth way, then you can't avoid that really.*

We talked before about your special role as first co-researcher in this particular study. Being the first, I will include information and reflection about the methodological process with the writing of the paper. I will share the procedure that worked for us, and what I learned from our work together. This first experience with you has helped to prepare me to go on with the research. I will now contact the other two co-researchers and follow a similar process with them. And that is still agreeable with you, to be an official co-researcher whose input will be included within the final content of the thesis. *That's fine.*

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